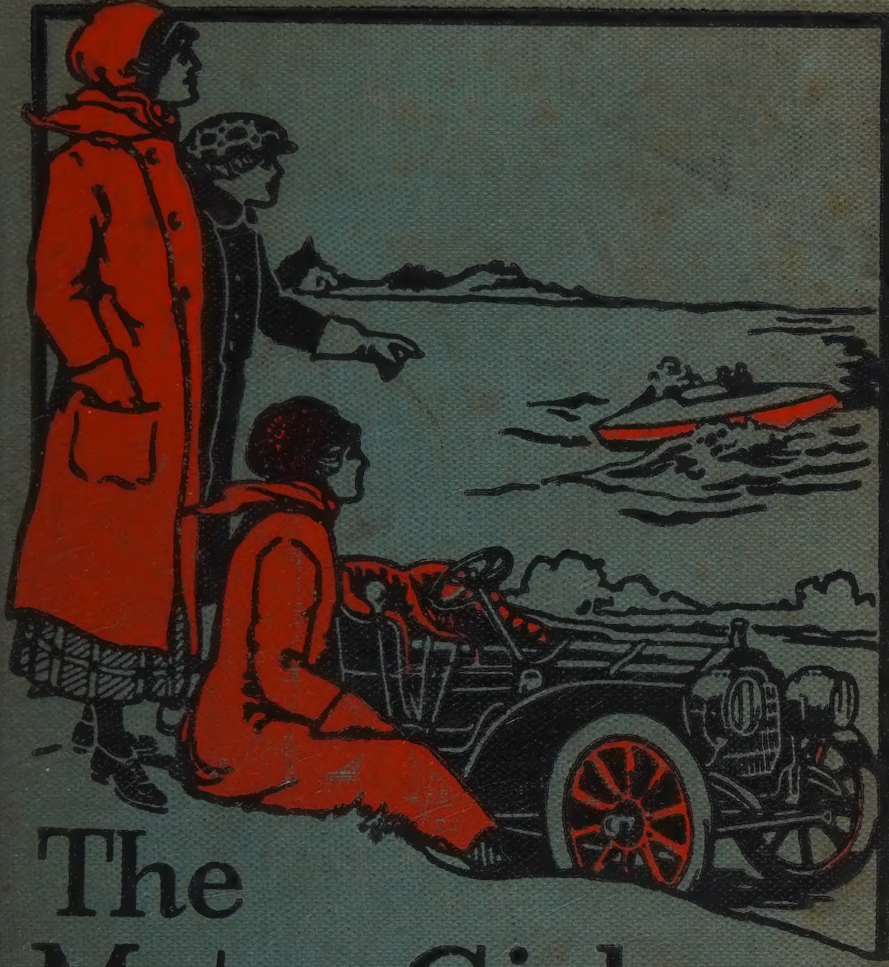
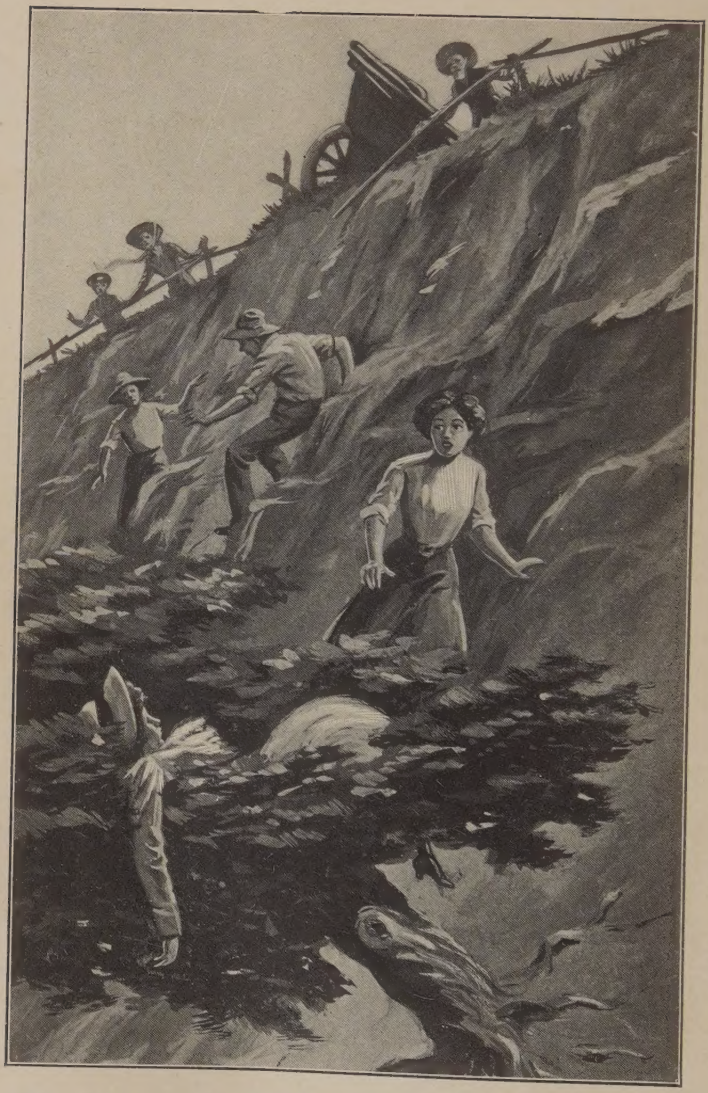


The Motor Girls at Lookout Beach

Margaret Penrose

Ruth Dockrey



CORA HAD FALLEN OVER THE CLIFF INTO THE SOFT BRANCHES OF A TREE

THE MOTOR GIRLS AT LOOKOUT BEACH

Or

In Quest of the Runaways

BY

MARGARET PENROSE

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR GIRLS," "THE MOTOR GIRLS ON A TOUR," "DOROTHY DALE," "DOROTHY DALE AT GLENWOOD SCHOOL," "DOROTHY DALE'S QUEER HOLIDAYS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

BOOKS BY MARGARET PENROSE

Cloth, Illustrated.

THE MOTOR GIRLS SERIES

THE MOTOR GIRLS
Or, A Mystery of the Road

THE MOTOR GIRLS ON A TOUR
Or, Keeping a Strange Promise

THE MOTOR GIRLS AT LOOKOUT BEACH
Or, In Quest of the Runaways

(Other volumes in preparation)

THE DOROTHY DALE SERIES

DOROTHY DALE: A GIRL OF TO-DAY
DOROTHY DALE AT GLENWOOD SCHOOL
DOROTHY DALE'S GREAT SECRET
DOROTHY DALE AND HER CHUMS
DOROTHY DALE'S QUEER HOLIDAYS
DOROTHY DALE'S CAMPING DAYS

(Other volumes in preparation)

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THE MOTOR GIRLS AT LOOKOUT BEACH

Printed in U. S. A.

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THE MOTOR GIRLS AT LOOKOUT BEACH

CHAPTER I

SUMMER PLANS

BESS ROBINSON was so filled with enthusiasm that her sister Belle declared there was serious danger of "blowing-up," unless there was some repression. Belle herself might be equally enthusiastic, but she had a way of restraining herself, while Bess just delighted in the "utmost" of everything. The two sisters were talking on the side porch of their handsome home in Chelton, a New England town, located on the Chelton river. It was a beautiful day, late in spring.

"Well, have you sufficiently quieted down, Bess?" asked Belle, after a pause, which succeeded the more quiet girl's attempt to curb her sis-

ter's enthusiasm—a pause that was filled with just the hint of pique.

"Quieted down? I should think any one would quiet down after such a call-down as you gave me, if you will allow the use of such slang in your presence, Miss Prim," retorted Bess, with a little tilt to her stubby nose.

"Oh, come now, Bess——"

"Well, don't be so fussy, then. We have always wanted to go to a real watering place, and now, when we are really to go, Belle Robinson, you take it as solemnly as if it were a message from boarding-school, summoning us back to class. Why don't you warm up a bit? I—I feel as if I could—yell! There, that's out, and I don't care! I wish I was a boy, and then—then I could do something when I felt happy, besides sitting down, and looking pleased. Boys have a way of showing their feelings. I know what I'm going to do. I'm just going to get out the car, and run over to Cora Kimball's. She'll know how to rejoice with me about going to Lookout Beach. Oh, Belle, isn't it just perfectly—too lovely for anything! There, I was going to say scrumbunctious, but I won't in your presence—Miss Prim!"

"Why, Bess—you silly," retorted her sister. "Of course I'm glad, too. But I don't have to go

into kinks to show it. We will have a glorious time, I'm sure, for they say Lookout Beach is a perfectly ideal place."

"'Ideal'! Oh, there you go!" and Bess made a grimace of her pretty face. "'Ideal'! Belle, why don't you take a private room somewhere, just off the earth, so you can be just as perfectly proper as you wish. 'Ideal!' Whoop! Why not sweet? Oh, I say—Burr-r-r-r! It's going to be immense! Now there, and you can get mad if you want to," and with this parting shot Bess hurried off to the little garage in the rear of the house.

"Is the car ready to take out, Patrick?" she asked the man of all work about the Robinson place.

"Yes, miss. I poured the gasolene in the little hole under the seat where you showed me, and I filled up the oil tank, and I give it a drink. I put in ice-water, Miss."

"Ice-water? Why, Patrick?" for Patrick was a new acquisition, and what he didn't know about automobiles would have made two large books of instructions to beginners. "Why ice water, Patrick?" and Bess raised her pretty eyebrows.

"Well, sure, an' Miss Belle said the other day, as how the water b'iled on her, miss—that is, not

exactly b'iled *on* her, but b'iled in the tea kettle —I mean that thing punched full of holes—in the front of the car."

"The radiator," suggested Bess, trying not to laugh.

"Yes, that's it, miss, though why they calls it a radiator, when they want it to kape cool, is beyond me. Howsomever——"

"About the ice water, Patrick."

"Yes, miss, I'm comin' to that. You see when Miss Belle said as how it b'iled over the other day, I thinks to myself that sure ice-water will never boil, so I filled the radiator with some as cold as I could bear me fist in it. Arrah, an' it's no b'ilin' water ye'll have th' day, when ye takes this car out, Miss Bess."

"Oh, Patrick, how kind of you!" exclaimed the girl. "And what a novel idea. I'm sure it will be all right," and she placed her hand on the radiator. It was as cold as a pump handle on a frosty morning.

"I blew up the tires, too, miss," went on the man, "an' here's a four leaf clover I found. Take it along."

"What for?" asked Bess, as she accepted the emblem.

"Sure, fer good luck. Maybe ye'll not git a puncture now. Clovers is good luck."

"Oh, thank you," said Bess earnestly, as she cranked up, for Patrick had not yet advanced this far in his auto-education.

Then the girl, most becomingly attired in auto hood and coat, backed the pretty little silver-colored runabout, *Flyaway*, owned by herself and her sister, "the Robinson twins," out of the garage, and turned it on the broad drive.

"Would ye mind that now!" exclaimed Patrick, admiringly. "It's as—as slick as a pig's whistle, miss, savin' yer presence."

Bess laughed merrily.

"I'm glad to see that some one besides myself uses a bit of—I mean an expression that means something—once in a while, Patrick," she said, as she threw in the clutch, after adjusting the lever to low speed.

"Yis, miss," answered the man, as he looked with admiration at the trim and pretty figure in the little car. "Now I wonder what did she mane?" he asked himself, when Bess was out on the road. "Sure them is two great gurls—Miss Isabel and Miss Elizabeth—great gurls!" and Patrick went to curry the horses kept by Mr. Rob-

inson, this being work that the genial and faithful Irishman understood perfectly well.

Isabel, meanwhile, continued to sun her splendid hair over the railing of the side porch, in spite of the almost constant danger that it might become entangled in the honeysuckle vine, or be mistaken by a wandering bee or humming bird for some nest or hive in which to nestle.

Isabel was always the "dreamer." She had "nerves," and she loved everything aesthetic. Bess, on the contrary, was always "on the spot," as her boy friends declared, and, while she might be a trifle over-enthusiastic at times, there was this consolation, that she was never glum, as her personal supply of good-nature never seemed to be lacking. Not that Isabel was moody, save at such times when she was alone, and thought of many things—for, in company, she entered into the fun with a zest equal to almost anyone's save her more volatile sister. So the Robinson twins were an interesting study—so different in disposition—so unlike in taste—but so well matched on two points—their love for motoring and a good time during vacation, and their love for their chum and companion, Cora Kimball.

While her sister was lazily dreaming away amid the honeysuckle vines, letting the gentle

breeze riffle through, and dry her hair, Bess was skimming along the fine Chelton roads, her mind intent on the good times in prospect when she, with her mother and sister, were to go to a cottage at Lookout Beach.

"Oh, I just know it will be perfectly bang-up!" exclaimed Bess, half aloud, and smiling at the chance to use words that meant something, without shocking Belle. "We will have no end of good times. My! It makes me want to go fast to think about it," and, suiting the action to the word, she pressed her foot on the accelerator pedal, and the car shot forward, while the hand on the dial of the speedometer trembled around the twenty-five miles an hour mark.

"I don't care!" thought Bess, as she kept her foot on the pedal. "I'm going to speed for once. Belle never will let me."

As she suddenly swung around a turn in the road she was made aware of how fast the pace was, for the car skidded a bit dangerously, and, a moment later, without a warning blast of the horn, another auto, moving in the opposite direction, shot into view.

By a quick twist of the steering wheel, nearly sending the car into the ditch at the road-side, Bess avoided a collision.

"Why didn't you blow your horn?" she shot indignantly at the occupant of the car—a young man, who had also turned out quickly.

"Why didn't you blow your own?" he wanted to know, and then he smiled, for he, too, had slowed down. "I guess it's horse and horse," he added, good-naturedly, if slangily. "I was thinking of something else."

"So was I," admitted Bess with a half smile, and then, having slowed down too much to allow going ahead on high speed, she had to throw out the clutch just as she was about to proceed, and change back to low gear. Quickly she threw into second, as a preliminary to third, but she was not quick enough. The motor stalled, and the car came to a stop, amid a grinding of the gears.

"Can I help you?" asked the young man, jamming on his emergency brake.

"No, thank you," answered Bess coolly and quickly. "I can manage," and, before he could reach her car, for he had alighted from his own, she had gotten out, cranked up, and was in her seat again. Then she hurried off down the road, leaving a rather crestfallen young chap standing in the dusty highway.

"Remarkably pretty girl—that," he said, aloud. "I wish I could have helped her. But she was

cool, all of a sudden. Maybe she didn't like my slang—I wish I could break myself of using it—hang the luck—there I go again," and, with a shake of his head he went back to his car.

"Adventure number one," mused Bess, as she swung along, not so fast this time. "I wonder what will come next? I guess I am getting a little too high-spirited. I must calm down. But I can't, when I think of Lookout Beach."

She had not gone a hundred rods farther when a flock of chickens crossed the road, just ahead of the machine.

"Shoo!" cried Bess. "Shoo! Scat! Get out!" and she blew the horn vigorously. "I wonder why someone doesn't invent a horn or something to scare dogs and chickens?" she went on, as the fowls showed little disposition to do more than run, fluttering and squawking, right ahead of the car. Then they darted to one side—all but one unfortunate, and the big rubber tires passed over one leg, crippling it.

"Hi, you! Stop!" commanded a woman's harsh voice, and Bess, who was running slowly now, saw an unlovely personage rushing from the yard of a dilapidated house, toward the machine. "I've got your license number," went on the woman, "and I'll make a complaint if you don't pay for

my chicken. You automobile folks is allers running over 'em, and cripplin' 'em so they ain't fit fer nothing'."

"This is the first time I ever run over anything," retorted Bess indignantly. "I guess I know how to drive a car!"

"Well, it won't be the last time you run over somethin' if you scoot along like I seen you just now," went on the owner of the limping fowl. "I want pay for my chicken, or I'll have th' law on ye," and she planted herself determinedly in front of the now stationary car.

"Very well," answered Bess, not wishing to argue with such a character. "Here is fifty cents. The chicken is a small one, and that's all it's worth. Besides it is hardly hurt at all."

"It's wuth seventy-five cents, ef it ain't a dollar!" stormed the woman, as she accepted the coin that the girl handed her. "I've a good notion to——"

But her further words were lost, for Bess turned on the power, threw in the clutch, shifted the gear lever, and was off down the road.

"Adventure number two," she remarked grimly. "I hope it isn't three times and out. Patrick's clover works by opposite, I guess," but she

drove along, her high spirits not a whit repressed by what had happened.

For Bess was not a girl easily daunted, as those of you who have read the previous volumes of this series know. She was almost the equal of her chum, Cora Kimball, was Bess Robinson. In my first book, entitled "The Motor Girls," Cora Kimball, the tall, handsome, dark-haired daughter of Mrs. Grace Kimball, and, likewise, the well-beloved sister of Jack Kimball, had first secured her auto. It was a four cylinder, touring machine, capable of good speed, and the color was Cora's special choosing—a handsome maroon. The story dealt with a mystery of the road, and told how Cora successfully solved it, in spite of the efforts of Ida Giles and Sid Wilcox to make trouble. As her guests Cora had, on many runs of her car, the Robinson twins, Walter Pennington, Jack's college chum, and Ed Foster. The latter was one of the chief figures in the road mystery, for one day he suddenly missed his wallet, containing money and negotiable securities to the amount of twenty thousand dollars. A little later the pocketbook, with the money missing, was found in the tool box of Cora's car.

Then there followed a "whirlwind" of excite-

ment, which did not end until those responsible for the taking of the money had been discovered and the cash and papers returned. Among other troubles Cora and her friends had to contend with the meanness of Sid Wilcox and the jealousy of Ida Giles.

In the second volume of the series, called "The Motor Girls on a Tour; or, Keeping a Strange Promise," there was related how Cora and her friends were instrumental, after making a strange promise, in restoring to a little cripple a long-lost table, containing a will. How the hunt for the strange piece of furniture, with a secret drawer, was made, while the girls were on a tour, how the Robinson twins managed their car, which they had secured in the meanwhile, and how Jack Kimball also succeeded in getting a runabout—all this is set down in the book. Paul Hastings, a young chauffeur, and his pretty sister Hazel, also had their parts to play, and well they did.

Now it was coming on summer again, and, after much planning and discussing, the Robinson twins and their mother had decided on a seashore cottage. They hoped that Cora Kimball could be induced to go with them, and, if Cora did go, why, of course, it meant that Jack would come

down, occasionally, or, perhaps, oftener. And Ed and Walter might also happen to drop in—which would be very pleasant.

"Oh, it's just glorious," thought Bess, as she continued to skim along. "I hope the season will be miles long and years old. We will have a gay time."

Bess turned the *Flyaway* into the gravel road that wound up to the handsome and stately Kimball homestead. A toot of the horn brought Cora out of doors quickly, while Bess jammed on the brake and threw out the clutch, and then, as the car came to a squeaking standstill, she shoved over the spark and gasolene levers, with a ripping sound along the ratchets, and turned off the sparking device.

"Come on in and cool off," invited Cora. "It's very warm. Summer has almost arrived. I'm delighted to see you, Bess."

"And I you. Indeed I am coming in. Such news—you'll never guess in your whole life, Cora."

"You're going to get a new machine!"

"No, not yet, though I think we will next season. Papa is sort of softening toward a six cylinder. No, but it's almost as good as that."

"What is it, dear?" and Cora placed her arm around the waist of Bess, as they mounted the broad steps.

"Cora Kimball, we're going to take a cottage at Lookout Beach! Such a delightful place—and Cora dear," she panted on, "can you come? *Will* you come?"

"Shall I come? Should I come," went on Cora, teasingly. "Why, my dear," she went on, "do sit down, and catch your breath before it escapes further. The boys are around here somewhere, and they are always on the still hunt for——"

"Cora Kimball! I'm not one bit out of breath," panted Bess, "but I am just dying to tell you——"

"Oh, that is it! Well, let me make you comfortable so that the death——" She stopped, and swung back a porch chair for Bess. The latter threw aside her motor bonnet and "ripped off" her gloves.

"No, but seriously, Cora," Bess said. "Will you go with us? We have taken a cottage, and we are, of course, going to take our car, and we do so want to take you!"

"You dear!" exclaimed Cora. "I haven't planned for summer yet, but I do think mother is going abroad, and I honestly feared I would have to tag along. I just hate to think of Europe,

so maybe I could induce mother to let me go with you. She has such confidence in Mrs. Perry Robinson."

"Mother would take all sorts of care of you. I can assure you and your mother of that," declared Bess. "And we have almost decided, without ever asking you, that you shall come along. What fun would we have motoring without you?"

"Without me, or without Jack?" teased Cora. "Well, never mind, Bess, perhaps we can take turns. I am sure I would rather go to Lookout Beach and camp than to go to Europe and tramp —there I have made a rhyme, and will see my beau before nine. Pray, Bess, come indoors with me while I complexion. I have been motoring all morning, in this stiff breeze, and I feel as if my face will crack if I don't hurry to cream it. And then, that I am to see my beau——"

The splendid color in Cora's cheeks belied her words. Nevertheless the girls went indoors, and, while Cora removed a surprising amount of grit on each piece of cotton she daubed her cheeks with, Bess had a better chance to talk over the plans for the summer at the seaside.

Following her cream-wash Cora turned on her face the tiny spray of tepid water from her own little silver faucet in the corner, and then "feeling

clean," as she expressed it, she just touched her cheeks and nose with another piece of cotton "to pat off the shine."

"You know I have to go out again this afternoon, and I do find that it pays to keep in order. I suppose Belle would think this sort of fixing up not half thorough enough?"

"Oh, she takes a regular Turkish when she has been out in a dusty wind," declared Bess. "But, for my part, I prefer a thick veil, in front of a cream setting. Then I catch all the dirt in the cream and only have to wash it off instead of——"

"Washing it on. A good idea, Bess. But I can't breathe back of cream. It makes my lungs sticky," and Cora put a last touch to her heavy dark hair, just as her brother's voice was heard in the lower hallway.

"There's Jack!" exclaimed both girls at once.

"Let's tell him," suggested Bess, who was not always able to conceal her interest in Cora's handsome brother.

"Oh, no, don't," whispered Cora, as Jack was almost at the door of the sitting room. "It will be a joke to plan it all out, and surprise the boys!"

But Jack was actually tumbling into the room before he saw Bess. He, too, was evidently "too full of good news to keep!"

"Oh, sis!" he yelled, still unconscious of the presence of Bess, "take my hand and squeeze it, or I shall 'bust.' It's too good to be true, and too good not to be true. We are going——"

Then his eye fell upon Cora's visitor. Instantly and in a boy's inimitable way he "pulled himself together" and finished: "We are going down to the post-office this evening!"

"Oh, is that all you were going to say?" asked Bess, in some disappointment, for it was evident that Jack had some news.

"Well, not quite all," he replied with an air of mystery, "only I happened to hear certain peculiar whispers and admonitions as I was coming in, and I guess girls aren't the only ones who can keep a secret. I'll tell if you'll tell," he added.

"We've nothing to tell; have we, Cora?" and Bess looked as innocent as possible.

"How could you ever imagine such a thing, Jack?" inquired his sister.

"Well, that's neither here nor there, then," was the young man's cool answer. "But if you're going after the stuff to make jam tarts with this winter, Cora, you'd better start," and at this somewhat enigmatical remark, Jack began whistling a tantalizing air, while Bess winked at her chum.

CHAPTER II

AT THE STRAWBERRY PATCH

"Yes, I promised mother I would go for a crate of strawberries," Cora said, by way of explanation. "Would you like to come along, Bess? It is a lovely ride to the berry patch."

"Then, I think I will run back for Belle, and we, too, may fetch home a crate. Mother will be delighted to get them fresh from the pickers."

"Suppose we meet in an hour at Smith's Crossing?" suggested Cora. "I have some little things to attend to, and that will just about give you time to get Belle, and her belongings."

This was agreed upon, and the girls parted for the short time. Jack insisted upon keeping his wonderful good news secret, for, try as he did, he could not coax Cora to divulge the news which he knew Bess must have brought.

"I could see it in her cheeks," Jack insisted, "and I can almost read that signal code you two have arranged."

"Well, when it is all settled I may—tell you,"

replied his sister. "But you boys imagine that girls cannot keep anything to themselves——"

"Wrong there, sis," he answered, picking up his cap. "We all know perfectly well that you all can keep to yourselves exactly what we want to know," and in leaving the room he tossed a sofa cushion at Cora's head, hitting her squarely, and knocking her hair awry. She retaliated, however, with a floor cushion over the banister, which Jack failed to dodge.

At the appointed time, three o'clock, on a lovely June afternoon, Cora and Bess met as arranged with their autos at the cross-roads, Belle dainty as ever in her flimsy veils and airy silk coat, Bess, with her hand on the wheel, her eyes on the road ahead, and her jolly self done up simply in pongee, while Cora, correct as ever, and equally distinctive in her true green auto hood, and cloak that matched, made up a very attractive trio of auto maids.

"It's only six miles out," called Cora, "and this road runs straight into Squaton. They have quite a big strawberry farm out there."

"Yes," called back Bess, turning on more gasolene and throwing in third speed, "mother was just delighted when I told her we were going there for berries."

Over the smooth, shaded road the cars sped, the *Whirlwind,* Cora's machine, exactly attuned to the hum of the *Flyaway,* the car occupied by the twins. Just as two clocks, placed side by side, will soon tick in harmony, so two good engines may match each other in the hum of speed.

"I can smell the berries," exclaimed Belle, as they neared a group of tall elms.

"We are almost there," remarked Cora, "and I think I, too, smell something good."

Under the trees by the roadside they espied some boys eating from a pail of berries.

"There," said Bess, "that was what you scented. Those youngsters have been picking, I suppose, and that is their own personal allowance."

"Berries! Five cents a quart!" called out one of the urchins, who at the same time stepped out into the road close to the slackened autos.

"Not to-day," replied Cora, as she passed on, followed by the *Flyaway.*

"Wouldn't you think they would want to take those home," said Bess. "I should think they would be satisfied with their earnings at the patch."

"Maybe they have not been picking—except for their own use," responded Cora. "But here we

are. Get out now, and we will walk over to the shanty where they crate the fruit."

"What an ocean of green!" exclaimed Belle, the aesthetic one, looking over the strawberry patch.

"An ocean of dust, I think," said Bess, as from the afternoon sun and breeze the grind of the picker's feet in the dusty rows between the countless lines of green vines just reached her eyes.

"There are plenty of them," remarked Cora, wending her way along the narrow path, toward the shanty.

"And so many people picking," added Belle. "Just look at those boys! They are as brown as —their clothes. And see that poor old woman!"

"Yes, her back must ache," replied Cora. "What a shame for her to be out in this sun."

"She looks as if she could never bend again if she should straighten up," said Bess. "See how she stares at us from under her own arms."

This peculiar remark caused the other girls to smile, but Bess meant exactly what she said—that the old woman was looking up from an angle lower than her elbows.

Just then the autoists faced two of the pickers —two girls.

Both stopped their work and looked up almost insolently. Then they spoke under their breath to each other and "tittered" audibly.

"They're rude," said Belle to Bess, picking her skirts as she stepped by.

"Oh, that's just their way," exclaimed Cora. "I am going to speak to them."

So saying she turned in between the rows.

"Is it hard work?" she asked pleasantly.

"No cinch," replied the older-looking of the girls, with a toss of a very good head of auburn hair.

"Have you been out long?" persisted Cora.

"Oh, we're always out," said the younger girl with a sneer. Her voice said plainly that she had "no use" for talking with the motor girls.

"Do you work all day?" asked Bess, a little timidly. Bess was always ready to admit that she could talk to boys, but that she was afraid of strange girls.

"All day, and all night," replied the younger girl. She had hair just a tint lighter than the other, and it was evident that the pair were sisters.

"But you cannot see to work at night," Belle deigned to say.

"We have lamps—indoors," said the girl, "and Aunt Delia keeps boarders."

"Oh, you help with the housework too?" said Cora. "I should think——" then she checked herself. Why should she say what she thought—just then?

Perhaps it was the unmistakable kindness shown so plainly in the manner of the motor girls, that convinced the two little berry-pickers that the visitors would be friends—if they might. At any rate, both girls dropped the vines they were overhauling, and stood straight up, with evident stiffness of their young muscles.

"But we are not going to do this all our lives," declared the older girl. "Aunt Delia has made enough out of us."

"Have you no parents?" ventured Cora.

"No, we're orphans," replied the girl, and, as she spoke the word "orphans," the ring of sadness touched the hearts of the older girls. Cora instantly decided to know more about the girls. Their youthful faces were already serious with cares, and they each assumed that aggressive manner peculiar to those who have been oppressed. They seemed, as they looked up, and squarely faced Cora, like girls capable of better work than

that in which they were engaged, and they gave the impression of belonging to the distinctive middle class—those "who have not had a chance."

"Can't you come over in the shade and rest awhile?" asked Cora. "You must have picked almost enough for to-day."

"Oh, to-day won't count, anyway," said the younger girl, with hidden meaning.

"Nellie!" called her sister, in angry tones. "What are you talking about!"

"Well, I'm not afraid to tell," she replied.

"You had better be," snapped the other.

"Oh, Rose, you're a coward," and Nellie laughed, as she kicked aside the vines. "I'm not going to work another minute, and you can go and tell Aunt Delia Ramsy if you've a mind to."

At that moment a figure emerged from the shed at the end of the long line of green rows.

"There she is now, Nellie," said Rose. "You can tell her yourself if you like."

Without another word the girls both again began the task so lately left off, and berry after berry fell into the little baskets. Rose had almost filled her tray, and Nellie had hers about half full of the quart boxes.

"Rose!" called the woman's shrill voice, from under the big blue sunbonnet. "Come up here

and count these tally sticks. Some of those kids are snibbying."

With a sigh Rose picked up her tray, and made her way through the narrow paths. Cora saw that the woman had noticed her talking to Bess and Belle, and while wishing for a chance to talk to Nellie alone, she beckoned to her companions to go along up to the shed.

"Maybe I'll see you soon again," almost whispered Nellie, in the way which so plainly betrays the hope of youth.

"I am sure you will," replied Cora, smiling reassuringly.

"What strange girls," remarked Belle.

"Aren't they?" added Bess, turning back to get another look at little Nellie in her big-brimmed hat.

"They are surely going to do something desperate," declared Cora, "and I think now that we have found them, as the boys would say, 'it is up to us' to keep track of them."

CHAPTER III

THE STRIKE

"Oh, mercy!" exclaimed Bess, as they neared the shed, "did you ever see such a hateful old woman!"

"Hush!" whispered Belle. "Do you want us to go back to Chelton without our berries?"

"If she ever looks at them they will sour—they couldn't keep," went on Bess, recklessly, but in lowered tones.

"We would like two crates of berries," Cora was saying to the woman, who stood, hands on her hips, framed in the narrow doorway of the sorting shed.

"Yes," answered the woman. "Step inside and pick 'em out. They are all fresh picked to-day. Rose, don't you know enough to make room for the young lady?" and the woman glared at the girl who had hurried in from the patch.

"Oh, I have plenty of room," Cora said with

a smile to Rose. "What are those little sticks for?"

"Them's the tally-sticks," answered the woman. "They get one for every quart they pick, and then they cash 'em in. Here!" and she snapped a bunch from the trembling hands of the girl who was counting and tying up in bunches the wooden counters, "let me show 'em to the young lady."

"Oh, I can see them," declared Cora, without trying to hide her distaste for the woman's rudeness to Rose. "How many tally-sticks did you get to-day?" she asked the girl.

"Oh, she don't get any," spoke the woman. Rose never raised her eyes. "Them two girls have me robbed with their eatin' and drinkin' and airs. I have to take care of them—they're me own sister's children," and she raised the hem of her dirty apron to her eyes.

"But they help you," insisted Cora. "They pick berries all day, do they not?"

"Help me?" came with a sneer. "I would like to see how! There's shoes to be bought, clothes and all sich. Then, butter is high, and them girls must have butter on their bread."

"When we don't get anything else," spoke up Rose, boldly.

"What!" called the aunt, her eyes flashing an-

grily. "That's the way I'm thanked! Go up to the house, and wash them dishes, and don't you leave the house till—I've talked with you," she commanded. "It's a hard job to bring up somebody else's children," and she tried to sigh, "but I am bound to do my best by 'em."

Bess and Belle seemed actually frightened. They did not venture under the roof of the shack, but stood at the door with eyes staring. Rose passed out, and, as she did so, she winked at Belle. Belle gave a friendly little tug at the brown apron as it passed, and then Bess went inside, at Cora's request, to select her crate.

Four very small boys slouched up the path to the shed. Their crates were full and they seemed ready to drop down from exhaustion. One, with fiery red hair, pushed his way ahead of the others and presented his tray to the woman. She surveyed it critically, then said:

"Andy, did you swipe a bunch of tallies this morning?"

"I did not!" replied the little fellow indignantly.

"How many you got?" she demanded.

He dug his dirty, brown hands down deep into his trousers pockets. Then he brought up three bunches of the tally-sticks.

"Humph! I thought so," said the woman. "Do you mean to tell me a monkey like you can pick ten an hour?"

"He's the best picker on the patch," spoke up another lad, "and I was with him when he brought each tray in!"

The girls stood back, deeply interested. The woman took the tray from Andy and turned away without offering the ten little sticks which represented the gathering of ten quarts of berries.

"Where's my tallies?" he demanded.

"You—jest—w-a-i-t," drawled the woman.

The other boys stepped back. Evidently they were going to "stick by Andy."

"I'll give you your crates, and let you go, young ladies," said the woman to Cora. "These little rowdies ain't no fit company for customers in automobiles."

"Oh, indeed we are enjoying looking around," declared Cora. "Do give the boys their checks, and let them go back to the patch. They are wasting time."

Thus cornered, the woman was obliged to go on settling with the pickers.

"Well," she said, "I'll give you credit, Andy, until I get a chance to look it up. Here, Narrow (to a very tall boy), gi'me yourn."

"Nope!" replied the tall boy. "We waits fer Andy."

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed the woman. "If you kids ain't got a cheek! I've a good mind to chase every one of yer."

Andy stepped back to where she had deposited the box.

"Here!" she called, entirely forgetting the presence of the motor girls. "Git out of here!" and at that she struck the little fellow a blow on the head that caused him to reel, and then fall backward into an open crate of fresh berries!

"Now you've done it!" yelled the woman. "You have mashed every one of them! There!" and she dragged him to his little, bruised feet. "Do you think I can sell stuff like that! Mush! Every red berry of 'em!"

"Oh, make her stop!" pleaded Bess to Cora. "She may strike him again."

"What will you do with that crate of berries?" asked Cora, pushing her way between the angry woman and the frightened boy.

"Make him pay fer 'em, of course," shouted the tyrant. "And serves him right, too, for his imperdence!"

Big heavy tears plowed their way through the

YOU HAVE MASHED EVERY ONE OF THEM YELLED THE WOMAN

dirty little spots on the boy's cheeks. To pay for the crate would take all his week's earnings.

"You did it yourself!" declared a boy who boldly faced the woman, "and Andy's not goin' to stand fer it, or we all strike; don't we, fellers?"

"Sure, we do!" came a chorus, not only from those who had been waiting, but from a second group that had come up in the meantime.

"Strike, eh?" cried the woman. "Well, you kin all clear out! Do you hear! Every dirty one of ye! Git off the place or—I'll let the dogs loose!"

"Oh, goodness me!" exclaimed Bess, clutching Cora's sleeve. "Do come away! There will be—bloodshed!"

"We must wait," replied Cora calmly. "I guess she is not so anxious to have her berries rot on the vines, and most of the good pickers seem to be with Andy."

Belle was nervously walking down the path toward the autos.

The boys stood defiantly, waiting for the woman to produce Andy's tallies.

"Give him his sticks," called one of them, "or we'll smash every berry in the patch!"

"You will, eh!" yelled the woman. "I'll show you!"

"Oh, Cora!" cried Bess, but Cora was too much interested in the boys to heed.

The woman left the shed and ran toward the house.

"She's after the dogs!" shouted one boy.

"Come ahead, fellers!" called another, and at that a dozen or more lads ran wildly through the patch, crushing the ripe luscious fruit as they went. Nellie, who was still picking berries, jumped up from her work. She saw the savage dogs tear away from their kennels, their chains rattling as the woman snapped them from the collars.

Bess and Belle ran to Cora within the shed.

"Here, Nero! Nero!" suddenly called Nellie. "Here Tige! Here Tige!"

Wonder of animal instinct! Those two dogs forgot the commands of the woman to "Sic 'em!" and eagerly they ran to Nellie. To Nellie to be patted, and caressed. To Nellie who fed them! What did they care about the woman who would strike them? Nellie was their friend and now they were hers! The woman, having let loose the dogs, ran on toward the house, some distance from the berry shed.

CHAPTER IV

ARBITRATION

LIKE a heroine in a drama Nellie stood there, one sun-burned hand thrust through the collar of each panting dog.

The boys saw their advantage and ran like Indians through the patch of berries, tramping the ripe fruit under foot in their unreasoning anger.

"Hey! Stop that!" shouted Nellie, "or I'll let them go!"

Instantly every boy stood still.

"Come on," called Cora to the other two girls, "we must help Nellie."

As quickly as they could trudge along the rough pathway, Cora, Bess and Belle hurried to where Nellie stood with the dogs.

"Call the boys back to the shed," shouted the girl, "then I can take the dogs to their kennels."

"Come here, boys!" called Cora. "Come back to the shed, and we will see fair play!"

The words "fair play" had a magical effect on the strikers. They now jumped between the rows, and it would be safe to say that not one of them, in the return, stepped on a single berry.

"All right, miss," answered the lad called Narrow. "We goes back to the field, if Andy gets his tally-sticks."

"Does this woman own the patch?" asked Cora.

"Never!" replied one of the boys. "She's only the manager. The boss comes up every night to pay us our coin."

"Then we should see him, I suppose," said Cora, as Nellie walked past with the dogs close beside her, each animal wagging his appreciation for the girl that led them on.

"Aunt Delia scares easy," whispered Nellie, almost in Cora's ear. "Just chuck a big bluff and she wilts."

Cora smiled. She was happily versed in the ways and manners of those who "had not had a chance."

"I am so afraid she will—hurt Rose," sighed Belle. "Oh dear me! What a place!"

"But I think it rather fortunate we were here," replied Cora. "These youngsters can scarcely take their own part—prudently."

Andy hung back near the shed. He was still trying to choke down the tears. How could he ever pay three dollars and seventy-five cents for that crate of crushed berries? And it had not been his fault.

The strikers stood around Cora, each little fellow displaying his preference for "a good honest strike" to that of hard work, in the sun, on a berry patch.

"Narrow speaks fer us," announced a sturdy little German lad. "Eh, Narrow?"

"We all goes back, if Andy gets his sticks," spoke Narrow, who was evidently the strike leader.

"Well, come along," ordered Cora, feeling very much like a strike breaker, "and we will see what Mrs. Ramsy says."

Led by the motor girls the procession wended its way back to the shed.

"Never mind, Andy," said a boy called Skip, who really did seem to skip rather than walk, "we will see you 'faired.' "

Andy rubbed his eyes more vigorously than before. Cora was in the shed, and Nellie hurried away with the dogs, promising to send Mrs. Ramsy down from the house. Meanwhile Cora had ample opportunity to get acquainted with her

little band of strikers. They were very eager to talk, in fact all seemed anxious to talk at once. And their grievance against the woman "who ran the patch" seemed to have begun long before her present difficulty with Andy.

"She's as mean as dirt to them two girls," said one urchin, "and anybody kin see that them girls is all right."

"They pick out here from the break of day until the moon is lit," said another, "and after that they has to work in the house. There's a couple of boarders there and the girls keeps the rooms slick."

"Boarders?" asked Bess.

"Yep, and one old dame is a peach," continued the boy, not coarsely but with eager enthusiasm.

"The one with the sparklers," added another. "Hasn't she got 'em though?" and he smacked his lips as if to relish the fact.

"There comes Ramsy," whispered a third. "Whew! But she looks all het up!"

The woman did look that way. Her face was as red as the berries in the trays and her eyes were almost dancing out of their sockets.

Cora spoke before anyone else had a chance to do so.

"The boys are willing to arbitrate," she said.

Then she felt foolish for using that word. "They have come for terms," she said, more plainly.

"Terms!" repeated the woman scornfully. "My terms is the same now as they was first. Andy Murry pays for that crate!"

"If the crate is paid for will it belong to him?" asked Cora.

The woman stopped, as if afraid of falling into some trap. "I don't care who owns 'em, when he pays for 'em. But he sneaked out one bunch of tallies——"

"He did not!" shouted a chorus. "He earned every one he's got and the ten that you've got!"

"And it was you who spoiled the berries by pushing him into them," shouted some others, "and we are here to see him faired."

Cora was perplexed. She wanted to save more trouble, yet she did not feel it "fair" to give in to the woman.

"Your berries are spoiling in the fields now," she suggested, "Why don't you give in, and let the boys go back to work?"

"Me give in to a pack of kids!" shouted the enraged woman.

"She is always sour on Andy because his mother won't do her dirty washing," explained the German boy.

"My mother is sick—and she can't wash," sobbed the unfortunate Andy.

"Yep, and that money of his'n was for her, too," put in Skip.

At this point another figure sauntered down from the house.

"There comes Mrs. Blazes!" put in Narrow. "She couldn't miss the show."

The woman who came down the path sent on before her the rather overpowering odor of badly mixed perfumes.

"Look at her sparklers," whispered a boy to Cora, "that's why we call her 'Blazes.' "

A black lace scarf was over the woman's head and now the "sparklers," or diamonds that she wore, in evident flashy taste, could be seen at her throat, and on her fingers. Bess smiled to Belle, and Cora turned to the boys.

"We must finish up this business," she said. "It is getting late, and we have to go to Chelton."

"Go ahead!" called the urchins.

"Fork out Andy's sticks," shouted some others.

"What is the crate worth?" asked Cora.

"It was worth three dollars and seventy-five cents," said the woman, "before that scamp deliberately set in it."

Cora did not intend to argue. "Then if the

berries are bought you will give the boy his tallies?" she pressed.

"Of course," drawled the woman, beginning to see Cora's intentions.

"He's not goin' to pay fer them!" interrupted Narrow. "What does she take us for?"

"Hush!" commanded Cora. "Just give the boy his sticks, Mrs. Ramsy, and I'll attend to the rest."

"What'll I give him the tallies for when he owes me more than they're worth?"

"To satisfy the boys," demanded Cora. "I will take that crate of berries. They will suit me as well as any others."

Seeing herself beaten, the farm woman handed the tally-sticks to Cora, who put out her hand to take them.

"Now, you boys carry that crate down to the big machine in the roadway," she said, "and I will pay Mrs. Ramsy!"

A wild shout went up from the boys! The woman had been beaten! She had not sold but the one crate of berries! And that was the one she demanded Andy should pay for!

Cora winked at Bess and Belle and the girls understood perfectly what she meant.

"Don't the other young ladies want any?" asked the woman. "You said two crates!"

"But we haven't time now to stop longer," said Cora. "We can come again, when the sun will not be so hot. Then we may have a better choice."

It was Andy who helped Narrow carry the crate to the *Whirlwind*. "Thank you, miss," he said, "I was almost sick. And mother expected the money to-night."

"Yes and she gets it," declared his companion, handing up the crate to Cora, who stood in the car. "Whew! Ain't this a good one though!" and he looked at the splendid maroon auto. "Must have cost a lot."

"Quite a good deal," said Cora. "Some day, when I come again, perhaps I will give you a nice ride in it!"

"There's Nellie," called Bess. "She wants to speak with us, I guess."

The girl, who had put the dogs back on their chains, was hurrying down the path.

"Good-bye," she said, "I don't think we will be here when you come to-morrow."

"Where are you going?" asked Cora.

"Don't speak so loud," cautioned Nellie. "That old Lady Blazes is just as bad on us as Aunt

Delia. And worse, for she puts her up to everything."

"Nellie! Nellie!" shrieked the one termed "Blazes." "Your aunt wants you right away up at the house!"

Nellie turned with a nod to Bess and Belle.

"Ain't that a shame!" said Skip. "We will strike fer them girls next."

CHAPTER V

TOO CONFIDENT

"MOTHER will be so disappointed not to get her berries," remarked Bess, as she and Belle, in their little *Flyaway,* got out on the road, following Cora.

"But Cora did wonderfully well, I think," replied the sister, "to get the better of that horrid woman. She was going to sell two crates, and she only actually sold the crate which she insisted Andy should pay for. It takes Cora—she is a born leader."

"It certainly was diplomatic," agreed Bess, "and I suppose we can come out to-morrow for the others. Mother was not particular about having them done up at once. But weren't those girls queer? And how stage-like little Nellie looked with those fierce dogs at her side, and the boys standing around her? I declare I think that would make a play."

"Better try your hand at it," suggested Belle.

"I always thought you had some hidden talent. It may now be discovered."

"And do you think the girls are going to do something desperate?" asked Bess, throwing in more speed, and brushing along at a lively rate over the broad country road.

"I am sure they are going to do something very unusual, but whether it may be desperate, or simply foolish, would be impossible to surmise with any degree of certainty," replied the judicious Belle. "I fancy they intend to—leave the strawberry patch, at least."

Cora turned, and called to Bess to look out for the "Thank-you-ma'ams" that were so plentifully scattered over the hill they had just come upon. Some were deep and long, she said, and with the ever-increasing grade might stall an overworked engine. Following the advice, Bess changed to low gear, and crawled up and down the hills, after the pace set by Cora.

One very steep hill confronted them. The engines of both cars were fairly "gasping for breath," and Cora, knowing that the hot radiators could cook anything from cabbage to pork and beans, realized that it was not wise to start up the hill until the engines had been cooled off. Consequently the cars stopped near a spring

house at the roadside, and the girls alighted to get a refreshing drink. The door was unlocked, and a clear, clean glass stood on a small shelf, just inside the low building.

"Did you ever see anything so delightful?" exclaimed Belle, while Cora dipped the glass in the square, cement-lined pool, and brought it up filled with the coolest, and most sparkling water imaginable.

"And was it just built for—roadsters?" asked Bess, taking the proffered drink.

"Oh, no indeed," said Cora with a laugh. "These spring houses are the farm refrigerators. In this, every evening, I suppose many, many quarts of milk are put to cool for the creamery. I have often seen a spring house just filled with the big milk cans."

"Oh," answered Bess, intelligently. "That's a good idea. Just think how much money we could save on ice if we had a spring house."

"Maybe if we had one, you would be able to cool off sometimes," remarked her sister teasingly. "You look as if you needed a dip this very minute."

The red cheeks of Bess certainly did look overheated, and the way she plied her handkrechief betrayed her discomfort.

"An internal dip will do nicely, thank you," answered the girl. "I don't see that I am any warmer than the rest of you."

"Here comes a girl from the house," said Cora, as down the path a girl, in generous sunbonnet, and overgenerous apron, was seen to approach.

"Do they wear their sunbonnets to bed?" asked Belle. "I am sure there is no sun now."

"Father will be down in a minute with the team," called out the girl, much to the surprise of the motor girls.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Belle, "are we going to be arrested?"

"I think not," replied Cora; "however, we are trespassing, though I did think farmer folks very —liberal, especially with their spring water."

"The girl is smiling like a 'basket of chips,'" said Bess, almost in a whisper. "It is not likely that she is angry with us at all."

"Did you get a nice drink?" asked the strange girl, with unmistakable friendliness.

"Oh, yes, thank you very much," spoke up Cora, "but I am afraid we are trespassing."

"Not at all," said the girl. "My name is Hope —Hope Stevens," she said, in the most delightfully simple manner. "I always like to introduce myself—'specially to young girls."

"We are very glad to know you, Hope," said Cora. "This is Miss Bess Robinson, this Miss Belle Robinson, and I am Cora Kimball."

"Oh, I know who you are now," declared Hope. "They call you the Motor Girls."

"I am afraid they do," agreed Bess. "But then we are just plain girls as well—our motors do not make us—we try to make them—go!"

"That is what father said when he saw you come over yonder hill, when he left the field to get the team. Do you know he makes more money hauling folks with automobiles up this hill, than he does on the farm? He always stops his work and gets the team ready when he sees an auto stuck out here."

"Oh, that is what he intended to do," said Cora. "Well, it was very good of him to be so prompt, but we are always able to make our own hills—I don't really think we will need him."

"Lots of folks think that way," said Hope. "But, of course, you ought to know—best. Do you think you can get up the hill?"

"Yes. You see these are practically new machines," explained Cora, "and we have been taught to run them carefully."

"Pa says that girls are more careful than men," added Hope, and Belle kept her eyes on the pretty

face beneath the bonnet. She thought she had never seen such dimples, and such splendidly marked brows.

"There comes pa now," went on the girl. "He will be——"

"Disappointed, of course. It was too bad for him to leave the fields," said Cora.

"Well, the rest won't hurt his poor back," ventured Hope. "Pa works harder than any of the hired men, and these are very bad hills to farm."

"Are you ready, young ladies?" called the man from the road, as he backed the sturdy team of horses up close to the *Whirlwind*. "I guess this little machine can hitch behind t'other."

"Really, we do not think we will need any help," said Cora, rather confused. "We always take hills without trouble."

"Never been up this one though," declared the farmer, with a shake of his broad-brimmed hat. "I reckon you'll not be able to fly over the top."

"It's awfully good of you," put in Bess. "But suppose we try? You see we do not want to break our records."

"Plucky, all right," the man commented. "Well, go ahead, and I'll stop to chat with Hope. If you get stuck just give me five quick toots, and I'll be there."

The girls thanked him profusely, and after cranking up both the *Flyaway* and the *Whirlwind,* said good-bye to Hope and her father, and started off, both machines on low gear.

"It is steep," remarked Belle to Bess. "Perhaps it would have been well to have taken his offer."

"All right?" asked Cora from ahead, as she looked back.

"Thus far," replied Bess, clutching the wheel with nervous energy, and slightly retarding the spark.

Suddenly the *Whirlwind* stopped—but only for an instant, for directly the big four-cylinder car began to back down the steep grade, while Bess and Belle shouted in terror for Cora to turn into the gutter!

Not knowing how deep and dangerous this gutter was Cora directed the runaway machine well into the side, vainly trying to make the brakes hold.

The next moment there was a crash!

The *Whirlwind,* with Cora in the car, was ditched—turned over on its side!

Bess tooted the horn of the *Flyaway* frantically!

Then she was able to bring her car to a standstill, and run to Cora's assistance.

CHAPTER VI

CORA'S QUEER PLIGHT

SPRINGING to the back of one of the big field horses, Farmer Stevens responded to the frantic summons of the auto horn, and started with the pair up the hill to the assistance of Cora, and the righting of her car, that almost swung between the narrow ledge of land, and the great gulf of mountainous space that lay just beneath the banked up highway.

"Oh, I am so afraid that Cora is hurt," wailed Belle. "We can't see her, and she must have been tossed over into the tonneau of the car."

"She was on the right hand forward seat," gasped Bess, as both girls ran along to the spot where the *Whirlwind* was ditched, "but she may have sprung out to avoid being thrown down the gully."

Although Bess was but a short distance behind Cora when the latter's car met with the mishap, it now seemed a long space of roadway that lay

between them. Of course Bess had to bring her car to a safe place, at the side of the thoroughfare, and Belle had to help some, so that it had taken a minute or two to do this, before they could run to Cora. In the meantime Mr. Stevens came along with his horses, and Hope, signalled by the tooting of the horn of the *Flyaway,* had called two of his hired men from the fields, so that the ditched auto and the danger to its driver met with ready assistance.

"Oh, if Cora should be——" Then Belle checked herself. She had an unfortunate habit of predicting trouble.

Mr. Stevens left his horses by the rail fence through which the *Whirlwind* had passed without hesitation, and Bess was beside him just as he reached the big car.

"Oh, where is she!" wailed the girl, unable longer to restrain her fears.

There was the car, partly overturned but seemingly not damaged. Neither within nor without was there a sign of Cora!

"She must have been thrown down the embankment," said the man anxiously. "She surely is not with the machine."

Bess now joined Belle and ran to the edge of the

cliff. Almost afraid to look, they peered over the brink.

"Where can she be?" breathed Belle, her hands clasped nervously.

"Cora! Cora, dear!" called Bess. "Where are you?"

"Here!" came what seemed to be a very faint reply.

"Where?" shouted the girls, now making their way down, step by step, over the perilous cliffs.

Farmer Stevens knew every inch of that hill. He often had to rescue from its uncertainties either a sheep or a young cow. He also knew that precisely where the machine was ditched, the hill shelved to a perfectly straight bank, so that instead of an incline the wall of earth actually seemed to run under the surface.

"If she went over there," he told himself, "she never stopped until—she landed."

"Oh, Cora!" called the girls again, "can't you tell us where you are?"

"Look out there, young ladies," cautioned Mr. Stevens, "or you may go down—double quick!"

Hope was scaling the rocks like a wild creature. The two hiredmen were almost jumping from cliff to cliff making straight for the clump of hemlock

trees at the very edge of the stream, that, in its quiet way, defied the great hill above it.

"Here she is!" called Hope. "Here in the—bed of hemlock!"

To Bess and Belle, not acquainted with the peculiarities of the flat-branched evergreen, finding Cora in "a bed of hemlock" was rather a startling discovery, but to Hope—what nest could have been safer! Cora had fallen over the cliff into the soft branches of a tree that jutted out from the shelving earth.

"Are you hurt?" asked the girl from the farm, looking up into the branch of the big green tree.

"I don't know—I don't think so, but I feel queer. I must get down," Cora managed to say.

By this time the others had reached the spot. Bess and Belle were almost hysterical lest Cora should lose her hold and again fall to a more dangerous landing. But the hiredmen stationed themselves under the tree, and, with their strong arms netted beneath the giant evergreen, they waited for Mr. Stevens to give an order.

"All ready?" asked Mr. Stevens.

"Yes, sir," replied the men.

"Young lady, can you get free of the branches?" he called to Cora.

"I am directly over a great hole," she answered

timidly, "and I am afraid I cannot hold on another minute."

"Then drop," said the farmer. "We will catch you. Don't be afraid. You can't escape the arms of Sam and Frank!"

"Oh, if she should go to the bottom," wailed Belle, covering her face with her trembling hands and uttering sighs and sobs. Bess was more courageous, but equally frightened.

Sam and Frank stood like human statues. Clasped hand to wrist, their sunburned arms looked strong and secure.

Presently there was a fluttering in the leaves—a slide through the branches and Cora dropped—down on the human net of arms, safe, and seemingly sound, but too weak to recover herself at once from the strange position.

Gently as could a woman, these farm hands lowered their burden to the soft bed of moss at their feet. Belle and Bess leaned over the quiet form, while Hope hurried to the stream below for some water, which she quickly brought in the strong cup improvised from her stiffened sunbonnet.

"This is spring water," she said. "Swallow a few mouthsfull."

Cora opened her lips and sipped from the

strange cup. Then she turned and tried to rise, growing stronger each instant, and determined to "pull herself together."

"Wasn't it silly?" she asked, finally.

"Wasn't it awful! Are you much hurt?" inquired Belle, fanning Cora with her motor hood.

"Not a bit—that I can tell," she answered. "That natural—hammock—was a miracle."

She attempted to rise, but fell back rather suddenly.

"I've got a twist somewhere," she said. "I think my shoulder is sprained."

Without waiting to be asked to do so Frank, the younger of the farm hands, put his arm about Cora's waist, and brought her to her feet.

"Oh, thank you," she stammered rather shyly. "I am sure you have helped me wonderfully. I don't know how to thank you—all."

"You can stand, eh?" asked Mr. Stevens, satisfaction showing in his voice, and ruddy face.

"I suppose you feel—that I should have taken your offer for the horses?" she remarked with confusion.

"Well, there is always a first time," he replied, "but since you are no worse off you must not complain. Guess the boys had better lift you to

the road. Then we will see if you can run your car."

Again, in that straightforward way, peculiar to those who know when they're right and then go ahead, the "boys" simply picked Cora up, she putting her arms over their shoulders, and while the three other girls wended their way over the cliff, Cora was carried safely back to the spot where still lay the helpless *Whirlwind.*

CHAPTER VII

THE CLUE AT THE SPRING HOUSE

JUST how Cora did manage to run her car into Chelton, with a stiffened wrist and a twisted shoulder, she was not able to explain afterward to the anxious ones at home. Belle rode with her, and was sufficiently familiar with the machine to take a hand at the wheel now and then, but it was Cora who drove the *Whirlwind,* in spite of that.

It was now two days since the eventful afternoon at the strawberry patch, and the girls were ready again to make the trip to Squaton, in quest of the crate of berries promised to Mrs. Robinson.

Jack argued that his sister was not strong enough to run her car with ease, so he insisted on going along. Then, when his friends, Ed Foster and Walter Pennington, heard of this they declared it was a trick of Jack's to "do them out

of a run with the motor girls," and they promptly arranged to go along also.

Ed rode with Walter, in the latter's runabout, and the twins were, of course, together in the *Flyaway,* while Cora was beside Jack in the *Whirlwind,* for, although the girls were speedily turning into the years that would make them young ladies, they still maintained the decorum of riding "girls with girls" and "boys with boys," except on very rare occasions.

As they rode along, an old stone house, set far back from the highway, attracted Jack's attention.

"Let's stop here," he suggested, "and look over the place. I'll bet it has an open fire place with a crane and fixings, for cooking."

Word was passed to those in the other cars, and all were glad to stop, for the afternoon was delightful, and the ride to Squaton rather short.

As no path marked the grass that led to the old house it was evident that no one had lately occupied it. The boys ran on ahead to make sure that no ghosts or other "demons" might be lurking within the moldy place, while Cora, Bess and Belle stopped to pick some particularly pretty forget-me-nots, from near the spring that trickled along through the neglected place.

Just back of the house, over the spring, the

boys discovered the inevitable house for cooling milk, and here they delayed to drink from their pocket cups.

"What's in the other side?" asked Walter, peering through the broken boards into a second room or shed, for the shack was divided into two parts.

"More spring, I suppose," replied Jack, taking his third drink from the small cup.

Walter and Ed had finished drinking just as the girls came up, and Jack attended to their various degrees of thirst for pure spring water.

"What a quaint old place," remarked Belle. "What's in the other little house?"

"We are just about to find out," said Jack. "The other fellows couldn't wait, and are in there now."

Hurrying out, they all entered, through the battered door, into the "other side."

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Ed. "What does this mean?"

"I also declare, 'what does this mean?' " added Jack, picking up from a queer sort of wooden platform in the place, the unmistakable blue bonnet of a child or young girl.

"And this!" exclaimed Cora, picking up a hat.

"This is—Nellie's hat! Nellie from the strawberry patch!"

"They have run away!" gasped Bess, without further investigation, "and here are the remains of their lunch!" The fragments of a very meager meal—some crusts of dry bread—and an empty strawberry box, told the story. "Surely this had been the lunch of the runaways."

"They must have slept here," went on Cora. "Poor little dears! What a shame! How frightened they must have been to sleep in such a place."

"When you young ladies get through with the allegory, I hope you will give us the libretto," interrupted Jack. "Who may be the fair maids who have slept in this shack, and eaten the bread of freedom?"

"Why, the girls from the strawberry patch, of course," said Bess, as if that explained everything.

"Why 'of course,' " said Jack mockingly.

"Certainly, of course," put in Ed, in the same tone of voice.

"And, to be sure, of course," went on Walter, provokingly.

"Why, we didn't tell you, did we?" spoke Cora finally. Then she did tell as much as she thought it wise to divulge about Nellie and Rose.

This information "caused a stir," (as Jack put it) among the boys. Instantly they began upturning stones, pulling down boards, and doing all sorts of foolish things searching for the runaways. But no other evidences were unearthed of the stay of the two girls in the spring house.

"I hope they hear us," called Jack, finally, raising his voice almost to a shout. "I must find Rose," he called. "Rose is all the world to me! My own little garden flower without a thorn——"

Walter interrupted with: "I must see Nellie home! Nellie! Nellie! Pretty little Nellie!"

"Do be quiet," begged Cora, "you will arouse the ghosts in the old house."

"Let's," suggested Walter. "Haven't seen a ghost in an age, and a ghost would be just pie for us in this place."

"Please don't," almost sobbed Belle. "I am really awfully creepy in here."

Seeing that she was actually nervous, the girls went outside, but the boys were not yet satisfied with their investigations.

"What on earth is this rig-a-my-gig for?" asked Walter, indicating the big sloping circular platform which occupied nearly all the space in the shack. It was on a pivot and could be turned around.

"Why, that's—let me see, that's——" but Jack couldn't just say what it was.

"I know," exclaimed Ed, suddenly. "That's a treadmill."

"A thread mill?" asked Walter.

"No, a tread-mill—a mill that was treaded. They used to make butter in olden times by having a sheep or a dog travel around on that sort of wheel, which was geared to a churn."

"See page one hundred and eight Encyclopedia Fosteria," put in Jack, with a good natured slap on Ed's broad shoulders. "When you don't see what you want—ask Ed," he finished.

Feeling that they had actually solved the mystery of the circular platform, the boys spent some time in examining the strange machine. Meanwhile the girls were peering in the broken windows of the old house, for Bess insisted that Nellie and Rose might have fallen ill after their long tramp from the strawberry patch, and that they might actually be lying within the tottering mass of mortar, beams and stones. But, of course, the fears of Bess were soon proved unfounded, and, at the urgent order of Cora, the party started again on the road to Squaton to get that "much delayed" crate of berries for Mrs. Perry Robinson.

"Keep a lookout along the road for the girls," Cora directed, as they started off. "We might spy them resting under a tree."

"You will never spy them," insisted Jack. "I am going to find Rose—my Rose, and Walter has his heart set on Nellie—*the* Nellie. So you girls may go to sleep, if you wish, for all the good your looking will do."

Only a joke—but many a jest begets a truth!

So the motor girls thought, in their long search for the unfortunate runaways.

CHAPTER VIII

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

ALL was confusion at the strawberry patch. The two orphan girls, Rose and Nellie Catron, had disappeared the night before, it was said, and not until shortly before the arrival of our friends in the automobiles, was another loss discovered—that of a pair of very valuable diamond earrings, the property of Miss Hanna Schenk, otherwise known among the pickers as "Mrs. Blazes."

So it was that the Chelton young folks, as Jack said, "struck a hornet's nest," for Mrs. Ramsy, somehow, seemed to be of the opinion that Cora could tell, if she would, something about the runaways.

"What could give you that idea, Mrs. Ramsy?" demanded Cora indignantly. "I only saw your nieces while I was here the other day, and I am sure I would have advised them to stay where they were, had they ever mentioned to me their intentions of leaving."

"That's all very well, young lady," growled the woman, "but I noticed how them girls edged up to you, and your friends, and I warn you, if I find that you have helped them off I'll have the law on *you*."

At this the young men came up to the shed where the unpleasant conversation was in progress. Jack, of course, was indignant, and, not only did he oblige Cora to leave the place at once, but, while doing so, he expressed his opinion directly to Mrs. Ramsy as to his personal measure of her character.

The whole affair was rather awkward, and the Robinson girls were obliged to leave the patch once more without their crate of berries.

Just outside the wire fence, and when the girls were about to step into the cars, they were hailed by Andy—the small boy whom Cora had so favored by buying the damaged crate of berries.

"Wait a minute, miss," he called. "I've got something fer you," and, so saying, he stepped up to the *Whirlwind* and, very cautiously, handed Cora a slip of paper. She took it and read these scrawled lines:

"Miss: We are going away, but we think we will see you again some day. You will find your

crate of berries under the tree where Andy will show you. They belonged to us and we paid for them.

"ROSE CATRON *and* NELLIE CATRON."

Cora looked down at Andy for a further explanation.

"They had to go away, miss," he said; "they couldn't stand it another minute. I will show you where the berries are."

"But how did the girls get the berries? They had no money," argued Cora.

"No, but their Aunt Delia took from them a ring that belonged to their own mother, and they took the crate to get even," declared Andy, his voice and manner showing his high regard for the "getting even" part.

Cora told the girls and boys about the matter, and they decided to go after the berries. Consequently Cora insisted that Andy ride in her car to the old willow tree, somewhat down the road, and as each tenth of a mile was marked in red on the speedometer dial the little fellow's face threatened more and more to catch fire from the auburn curls that fell in joyous affright about his temples.

Jack thought he had never known what it was to really enjoy a ride before, and he whispered to

Cora that he very much wished he might take Andy home "for a paper weight, or a watch charm."

"Right over there," directed Andy, after about a mile's ride, "under the big willow."

Turning the car in that direction, Jack drove across a shallow ditch, and was soon under the tree, while the other machines waited on the safer roadway.

Andy scrambled out, and Jack, leaving the wheel, went after him, followed by Cora.

"Here," said the boy, pulling aside a thick clump of berry vines. "Here's the crate."

Sure enough, there was the new crate, filled with berries, safe and untouched.

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Cora. "I really did not expect to find them."

"Very thoughtful of my Rose-bud," declared Jack, lifting the lid of the box. "What's this?" he went on, picking up a small object. "Something else for Cora, I wonder?"

At that moment, fortunately, Andy was occupied with a particularly attractive branch of red raspberries, and he did not see Jack lift out the article. Cora, so quick to apprehend any possible danger for others, was beside Jack instantly.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Don't tell the rest!

It is an empty jewel box—earrings have been in it!"

"You don't mean to say that the—girls have gone off with the old lady's earrings!" exclaimed Jack. "And left the empty box in this crate to get you into trouble!"

"Indeed I do not mean to say anything of the kind," hastily answered Cora. "I have always found that the most suspicious circumstance may turn out to be the most innocent matter, and, in this case, I have not the slightest doubt that we will find my rule to work true. In the meantime," she continued, slipping the little case within her blouse, "I will take care of the—evidence."

It was not without a rather nervous fluttering of her usually reliable nerves, that Cora finally did secrete the jewel box, and in spite of her firm declaration to Jack, she could not just convince herself that it was altogether right, for whoever had put the empty earring case in the crate, to have done so without making some sort of explanation.

For a moment she thought of asking little Andy if he could tell her anything of the strange affair, then she quickly concluded to await developments.

"Jack," she said, "we will take the crate of berries in our car. We have more room than the

others, and perhaps Andy would like a ride in town with us. He can take a trolley car back."

This pleased the youngster immensely, and so, when the famous crate of berries was at last loaded on the *Whirlwind*, and the word had been given to the others, the party started off on a merry run towards Chelton. On the way Cora had a chance to find out from the boy that the girls, Rose and Nellie, had walked away from their aunt's place after nightfall. Also that he, and some other boys, had helped them carry their things, which, as far as the willow tree, included the crate of berries. Cora also learned that the girls had started out "to see the world," and this last piece of information did not add to her peace of mind concerning the two orphans, who knew so little of this world, and its consequent dangers.

Jack was greatly taken with Andy, and promised to pick him up for a ride every time the *Whirlwind* came out Squaton way.

"Maybe you could get me a job," said the little fellow, glancing up with unstinted admiration at Cora's handsome brother.

"Believe I could," replied Jack. "Let me see, what is your specialty—what can you do?"

"I am a caddy," replied Andy proudly. "They

say I'm just as quick as any of them to trace a ball."

"Well now, that's fine!" declared Jack. "We play golf out Chelton way. Suppose you just take a trolley ride in next Saturday, and we will see what we can do. Here is your car-fare. Be sure not to lose it, for trolley fellows are no respecters of persons."

Meanwhile Bess and Belle were racing with Walter and Ed, and the afternoon was to them a time of that sort of enjoyment that comes unbidden, unplanned, and therefor proof against disappointment. Of course Cora was not by any means miserable, for no companion was to her more her chum than was Jack; then little Andy lent his novel personality to her surroundings, but still the thought that two young girls, Rose and Nellie, had deliberately run away, that they were practically accused of having taken a pair of diamond earrings valued at two hundred and fifty dollars, and that the case in which these stones seemed to have formerly reposed was actually found by Cora in the berry crate—was it any wonder that she did not laugh as lightly as did Bess Robinson? Or that she refused Ed Foster's pressing invitation to go into Snow's for an ice cream drink?

At the drug store Jack stopped the *Whirlwind* to allow little Andy to board a trolley car back to Squaton, but, as he left, Cora warned him to be very careful what he said about the runaways.

"Oh, don't you never fear, miss," he answered, crowding his negatives to make one good big "no." "Rose and Nellie are my friends, and I know how to stick by 'em."

CHAPTER IX

COMPLICATIONS

"Isn't it strange, Jack," almost whispered Cora to her brother, as, later that evening, the two sat on the veranda of their home, and talked over the day's proceedings, "I cannot believe—they—took them. But it does look very——"

"Well, sis," began the young man, "we have had other experiences with things that *looked* strange, and you will remember that strange looks are not to be depended upon for absolute facts."

"Oh, I don't mean to say that those two poor, strange girls could be so dishonest," she hurried to say, "but the trouble is, that Mrs. Ramsy is angry with them for leaving her, and of course she will do all she can to make trouble for them. Then she even threatened me."

"She did, eh?" exclaimed Jack. "Well, she had better go slow. I don't call a person ignorant just because they happen to be illiterate, for I always

find they know more than I do on some subject, but this woman—she is the—limit."

"You see," faltered Cora, hardly knowing just how to tell her brother, "the girls, it seems, had their mother's wedding ring, and she took it from them. To make up for that they took the crate of berries, then finding the earring-box in it——"

"I know exactly what you are afraid to surmise, sis," said Jack, "but, as I said before, it may all be wrong. I, of course, have never seen the girls, and cannot confess to so lively an interest in them as you have worked up, but I must say, I would like to see the old lady get what's coming to her."

The brother and sister sat in silence for a few moments, then a step on the path attracted their attention.

"Here comes Belle," exclaimed Cora. "Whatever brought her out alone, so near to nightfall? She is usually so timid."

Belle was actually trembling, as she took a chair on the porch. "Oh dear!" she began, "I am all out of breath. I was just scared to death coming over."

"Why didn't you 'phone?" asked Jack, "and I would have gone over after you."

"Cora," went on Belle, ignoring Jack's remark,

"I am afraid—there is a strange detective in—Chelton!"

"Well, what of that?" asked Cora, with a laugh. "Detectives are not really dangerous; are they?"

"Now don't joke," begged the girl. "I came over to warn you!"

"To warn me!"

"Yes, I heard that they are looking for——"

"Detectives looking for Cora!" almost yelled Jack, leaping up from his chair, as if some hidden spring had thrown him to his feet. "This is some of that woman's work! Tell me quickly, Belle, all you have heard—all you know."

"Bess and I were at the post-office when two strange men alighted from a runabout," went on Belle. "They came inside—and at the stamp window asked where Cora Kimball lived. Then Bess became alarmed, declared that they were detectives, and she wanted to come straight over and tell you, but father drove up at that very moment, and Bess had to go in town with him. Then I was on my way over when Tillie, our maid, met me and told me that mother had company from the West, and I was to hurry back home. Oh dear me, I did think I would never get here! Such complications!"

"Now, dear," said Cora soothingly, "don't you be the least bit alarmed. Of course, it is quite natural that Mrs. Ramsy should try to find her nieces, and quite right, too, so there is no harm whatever in her directing any one to me, to make inquiries. She evidently thinks I know more about the girls than I do."

"But there is a note in the evening paper telling all about the whole thing," declared Belle, "and it mentions that one hundred dollars reward will be paid for the return of the diamond earrings."

"Which looks," said Jack, "as if they are more anxious about the stones than they are about the girls. Well, we will have to await developments. I was going down to bowl to-night, but I guess I had better hang around now."

"Why, don't be foolish, Jack. You may just as well go out as not. Even if a strange man does come up, I am sure I will be able to talk to him. I have—ahem!—met strange men before," declared Cora.

"All the same, I guess I'll stay. I want to take Belle home, at any rate, and I am not particularly interested in the bowling game to-night, though Ed wanted me to be on hand."

A shout from the road, however, reminded Jack that it was time to start. The voice was at

once recognized as that of Ed Foster, and Cora begged her brother to run along, and have no fears on her account.

"And father and Bess will stop for me later," declared Belle. "They have been taking the Western folks out for a run. Bess has the car and papa the carriage, so there is no danger but that I shall fit in somewhere."

It was, nevertheless, much against the better judgment of Jack Kimball that he left his sister and Belle, and joined his companions bound for the bowling alleys. He did not mention to either Ed or Walter his fears for the comfort of Cora, should she be visited by the detective, but they both noticed that he was not quite his jolly self, and that he seemed to take little interest in their conversation or the sport at the alleys.

It was now almost nine o'clock, and, as Belle and Cora sat on the porch, enjoying the moonlight, in spite of their disturbed state of mind, they began to feel that the detective scare had been unfounded.

"I can't see why they would ask where you lived," said Belle, "if they did not intend to call on you."

At that moment a runabout turned into the driveway. Startled, the girls sprang from their

seats and hurried forward to see who might be coming. Belle clutched Cora's arm.

"Oh, it is the detectives," she gasped. "I know their machine! Oh, why did we let Jack go away?"

"Don't be nervous," commanded Cora. "If they really are detectives they will have reason to suspect us, if they find us frightened." Then, at a sudden thought, she added: "Belle, I believe you had better run indoors. You are nervous, and you might say something that would be better unsaid. I am sorry that the maids are both out, and that mother is not at home—it does seem as if we should have kept Jack."

There was no time for further comment, for as Cora opened the French window to allow Belle to enter the house without being noticed, the two men were seen coming up the path.

Cora had been in unpleasant predicaments before, each time the circumstance being a matter of protecting some friend, and this time she felt "keyed up" to almost any emergency. Also her past experience had taught her valuable lessons, so that she had no idea now of saying one word that might in any way compromise the two helpless Catron girls.

But even so wise a girl as Cora Kimball may be

careless in some matter, that, in itself, may seem unimportant, but upon which may hang the very thread of fate.

"Is this Miss Kimball?" asked the shorter of the two gentlemen who approached her.

"Yes," she replied with unconcern. She stepped directly under the electric light that illumined the porch.

"We are sorry to disturb you, especially as it is rather late," said the other man with unmistakable politeness, "but being in town we thought to cover this end of our business without making a second trip to Chelton. Is your brother, or mother at home?"

"No," replied Cora, "but, if it is necessary, I can call for my brother, over the telephone."

"Well, our business is a little unpleasant," went on the man, "and we would prefer to speak with you—before your brother. Yet, as he is not at home, I believe we had best call again. We really only need to make sure that you are not going out of town at once. We have heard that you intend going to the seashore, and as we are detectives, looking for the two Catron girls, we felt you might be able to give us some clue as to their whereabouts. However," and he turned to go down the steps, "we will come again to-morrow—

if we may now make an appointment for an interview with you."

Cora was much impressed with the man's manners. She moved to the edge of the steps.

"Certainly, I shall be at home to-morrow," she said, "and I will have my brother here with me. I will answer any questions, but really I know absolutely nothing of the whereabouts of the girls."

The men were on the steps. The light from the porch lamp cast a shadow, and Cora raised her hand to turn the switch that would light the lower steps. As she did so, something dropped from her blouse.

The detective stooped to hand it to her.

It was the empty jewel case!

THE DETECTIVE STOOPED TO HAND THE EMPTY JEWEL CASE TO HER

CHAPTER X

ALMOST—BUT NOT QUITE

"CERTAINLY take it," said Cora, "if it is of any use to you. I found it—out near the strawberry patch."

She was speaking to the surprised detective. He was examining the empty jewel case, and she had no idea of denying how she had come by it. From the description furnished to them the men were, of course, easily able to identify the tell-tale box.

But in spite of their consideration, and good manners, the detectives felt that they had stumbled on a very important piece of evidence. Certainly, this was the box that Miss Schenk had described as that in which her earrings usually were placed. True, she could not specify just when she had last put them in this box, but that this was *the* box was an important discovery.

"I cannot believe that the girls took the gems," said Cora, as the men at last turned to go, "for they seemed really such innocent young girls. The

only thing unusual about them, that I noticed, was that they had been overworked, and were consequently rather——"

"Revengeful," finished one of the men. "That is the suspicious point—even good young girls may be driven to desperation. However, Miss Kimball, with your permission, we will call to-morrow at four," and they raised their hats, and went down the walk.

Cora was stunned—that she should have placed into the very hands of the detectives so important a clue!

"And I meant to hide that box safely in my room," she reflected. "That was why I kept it in my blouse,—so as not to forget it."

The long window opened and Belle almost fell into Cora's arms.

"Oh, have they gone at last?" she gasped. "What dreadful thing happened?"

"Why, nothing happened," replied Cora, making up her mind instantly that the fewer persons who knew about the jewel box the better. "I thought them very polite officers."

"But when I saw you step to turn on the light I thought something happened—I saw you start."

"Belle, my dear, you are too romantic," said Cora, evasively. "I am afraid I shall have to

disappoint you this time, however, for my callers scarcely said a single word that was new. They are just looking for our runaways. And I do wonder where the poor, dear, lost, little things may be to-night!"

"Isn't it dreadful to think about it! I have read of such things, but to think that we really—know the girls."

There was a catch in Belle's voice when she said "know the girls." Plainly she had her doubts about the desirability of their acquaintance.

A whistle on the path told of Jack's return.

"Dear me," exclaimed Cora, "whoever would think it is almost ten o'clock!"

"And what can have become of papa and the others!" pondered Belle. "They were to call for me——"

The familiar toot of the *Flyaway's* horn interrupted her.

"There they are now," declared Cora. "My! what a full evening we have had. I feel almost too flustrated to meet your Western friends," and she smoothed out various discrepancies in her toilette.

"Come on, Belle," called Bess from the machine. "We can't come up. It's too late, Cora!"

she continued to call, "come here a moment. I want to tell you something."

At this Cora and Belle went down to the roadway. Bess was in the *Flyaway* with her mother and a strange lady, while down near the turn, at the corner, the lights of Mr. Robinson's carriage could be seen flickering in the summer night's shadows. He had not gone on the long road taken by the auto and in consequence, the two vehicles had arrived at the same time.

"Cora," began Bess, without introducing the stranger, "we have had the strangest experience! Away out on the river road we thought we heard the cry of a young girl! Yes, and we saw something white run across the road, in such a lonely place!"

"Mercy!" interrupted Belle. "I am glad I was not along."

"Well, papa happened to meet us there and stopped, and the coachman got out, and we looked all over the place with our lamps in hand, and see what we found!"

In the uncertain light Cora could not at once make out just what was the object Bess held up for her inspection.

"Don't you recognize it?" asked Bess. "Why,

it's Nellie's gingham dress; the very one she wore the other day."

"Oh," gasped Belle, "do you suppose they have drowned themselves!"

"Come, daughter," interrupted Mrs. Robinson, "we have already heard too much of these two very—indiscreet young persons. Come, Belle, my dear, we must get home. Cora, I would not advise you to waste too much sympathy on the girls from that farm. Evidently they are quite capable of looking after themselves."

This was said with that authoritative manner used by older, and more prudent persons, when trying to curb the enthusiasm of the inexperienced. Mrs. Robinson was not unkind, but she did not think it wise to let the girls' sympathy "run away with them," as her husband put it.

"All right, mamma dear," replied Belle meekly, really glad to climb into the small seat at the back of the *Flyaway* and start for home. The detectives had furnished enough excitement, but now came this strange news——

"Oh, I just want to tell Cora one thing more," said good-natured Bess. "Cora, when we finally did give up the search, and had gone along a little way, a trolley car passed, and it stopped

just at that turn in the road where there was an electric light."

"And couldn't you see who boarded it?" asked Cora.

"No, it was a park resort car, and just packed full of people, so we didn't even have a chance to get a glimpse of those who either got on or got off. Well, good night, dear," and Bess switched on the spark and started the engine without cranking. "I will see you to-morrow. We have got to finish up our plans—for—you know."

It was the approach of Jack that stopped Bess in her remark. The young man joked about it, and declared that he would soon discover the secret, warning the girls that Cora could never keep good news away from him, and that he felt it in his bones she would tell him about it that very night.

The girls retaliated with the assurance that this time, at least, Jack was not to know their secret, then, when the *Flyaway* had whirred itself off, Cora and Jack, arm in arm, started back to the porch.

Cora hardly knew how to tell her brother about the jewel box, but she finally managed to explain the peculiar happening.

"Well," said Jack, when she paused for his

opinion, "there's no use crying over spilled milk. The thing to do, I suppose, is to keep one's hands off milk. Now, I reckon you will be subjected to a lot of questions, when those fellows come to-morrow."

"They were really very polite," Cora assured him, "and I haven't the slightest dread about their questions. It seems to me, now, that we all ought to do what we can to trace the girls. From what Bess just told me I am afraid they are running about at night in lonely and dangerous places. And bad as their lot might have been, with their aunt, that was safer than these night escapades."

"True—very true, little sister," said Jack with his usual good spirits, "at the same time if they have committed—we will call it an indiscretion, in trying earrings in their ears, it might be just as well to give them a chance. No use running them into the very teeth of the law."

That was exactly how Cora felt about it. "Well," she said, as she picked up her fan and other little belongings, preparatory to going indoors, "we will see what comes of my official investigation. Perhaps, when the detectives have finished questioning me, they will be able to go to a telephone and call the girls home. I have

always heard that detectives do such wonderful things."

"Well, this time, sis, I will be at home when they call, unless something very unforeseen happens."

Jack pushed the bolt on the heavy door, and Cora went over the first floor of the house, attending to the duties, with which her mother, upon her departure for the city, had entrusted her.

Then, handing the silver to Jack, she put out the lights, and bade him an affectionate good-night.

CHAPTER XI

ANDY'S WARNING

THE parlor maid tapped at Cora's door. Gentle as was the touch, it awakened the girl, who answered quickly.

"Miss," said the maid, "there is a little boy downstairs who says he must see you at once. He simply won't take no for an answer."

"A little boy?" repeated Cora, sleepily. "Why, it's only six o'clock!"

"Yes, I know that, miss," went on the girl, "but Mary says he was outside on the step when she came down at five. He's a poor-looking little boy, but he doesn't want anything to eat. He says he must speak to you."

Without the slightest idea who her caller might be, Cora hurried into a robe and went down.

"He's on the side porch, Miss Cora," said the maid.

Cora went out through the opened French window.

"Why, Andy!" she exclaimed, for her early visitor was none other than the boy from the strawberry patch. "Whatever brought you into Chelton so early?"

"It's about the girls," he said under his breath, looking around suspiciously. "And it's about that old Mrs. Blazes!"

"No one will hear you," Cora assured him, taking a seat by his side. "What about the girls, and Miss Schenk?"

"Yes, and I was afraid I would not get here in time. She's comin' in here—to scare you. I heard her tell Mrs. Ramsy so."

"And you hurried in to warn me!" cried Cora, much amused at the lad's simplicity. "I am sure I am very, very much obliged. But tell me, what did she say?"

Andy shifted about uneasily. Evidently the information he had was not of the nature pleasant to impart.

"It was awful late last night when I heard it," began the boy. "Mrs. Ramsy owed mother for some washing, and she said if I went after the money late, when she had time to—bother with me, she would give it to me. Well, I waited until I saw she had slicked up the work the girls

used to do, and I was going to knock at the side door, when I saw two strange men get out of an automobile, and make for Ramsy's front door."

Andy paused, evidently expecting some show of surprise at this information.

"Well, go on, Andy," urged Cora. "What did the strange men have to do with it all?"

"They asked for Miss Schenk, and I just guessed right. They were detectives!"

Andy's eyes opened and closed in nervous excitement. To talk of detectives! To have seen them and to have heard *them* talk!

"Well," spoke Cora, almost smiling, "it was certainly right for Miss Schenk to have detectives look for her valuables."

"That's all right," assented the boy, "but wait till you hear! They told her—them two big fellows, that you—had the empty earring box, and that they got it from you!"

For a moment Cora was quite as indignant as she rightly supposed Andy to be.

"Did they say they got it from me?" she questioned.

"They said they were on the right track and would have the diamonds back to Miss Schenk

in one day. Then, when I heard them say your name, and that they had got the box out here, I just rubbered fer fair, I did."

"Now, are you sure, Andy, that you understood just what they said?" asked Cora, to whom the actual report of the detectives to Miss Schenk meant so much. "Try to tell me word for word."

"Oh, I heard them all right," replied the lad, "fer I crawled straight under the window, and I was as close as if I was in the old rocking chair under Mrs. Ramsy's arm. The thin fellow said he had found the box. Mrs. Ramsy asked where, and I thought she would swallow her new teeth the way she—gulped. Then the fellow said he had got them from a young lady out in Chelton. This was like a firecracker to the women, and they both went off at such a rate, that the fellows had to stop until they cooled off. Then, when they had said about all they could think of about girls in automobiles, and girls that came out makin' believe to buy berries, and just to steal—then, the other fellow—he has young whiskers—he said, that he couldn't say any more just then, but he did have to say that he got the box from Miss Cora Kimball."

This was a very long, and trying explanation for a boy like Andy, and he showed how the ef-

fort affected him. He jabbed his hands into his pockets, crossed and recrossed his sunburned legs, then at last, with one final attempt at self-possession, he got up and deliberately chased the cat off the porch.

"Was that your cat?" he asked sheepishly, realizing that he had no right to interfere even with a cat on another person's stoop.

"Why, yes," replied Cora, "but it is too early for his breakfast, and he knows he is not fed—here. So it's all right."

Then Andy sat down again, a little shy from his error, for he suddenly remembered a story his mother used to tell him of a rich young lady and her pet cat.

"But you were saying," Cora reminded him, her voice kinder if possible than before, "that these detectives claimed I gave them the box. Or did you say they claimed to have taken it from me?"

Andy scratched his head, right at the left ear which always served as a cue to the forgotten thing.

"They didn't say neither one," he replied finally. "They—said—they got the box in Chelton—off a young lady!"

Cora never before realized what an error in

speech might involve, but she knew it was useless to question the boy further.

"Well, don't worry about it," she said, "and I think now you ought to be ready for breakfast. Come, I guess Mary has something ready."

The boy stood up beside Cora, then, following an impulse that he plainly could not resist, he stepped between her and the door to the dining room.

"I ain't hungry, miss," he said, "but I want to warn you. You better git out of the state!"

So sudden and so unexpected was this bit of advice that Cora almost laughed, but looking into the earnest face before her she was constrained to repress even a smile.

"Why, Andy," she cried, "I am not afraid of any one. I don't have to run away."

"Well, you better be," he declared, his cheeks reddening to the very tint of his hair. "You better be afraid of Ramsy and Schenk. They're a hot team."

"But what have I done?" continued Cora, for the boy's manner demanded attention.

"My uncle didn't do anything either when he got out of the state. And if it hadn't been for that he would have been sent up. Fer nothin', too."

That there was more wisdom than eloquence in this was plain to Cora, but, even at that, she failed to grasp the whole meaning of Andy's warning.

"Will you go to-day?" he almost begged.

"Why, Andy?"

"Yes, please do go. I would hate to see you git into that—mix-up."

"Now, little boy, you must not worry about me. See what a big strong girl I am, and you know what a strong man Jack is."

"'Taint a matter of fists," Andy declared, clenching up his brown hands, "but it's them womens' tongues. You don't know what sneaks they are, and if you don't say you will go away to-day, before they git at you, I think I had better tell your brother all about it."

"Haven't you told *me* all about it?"

"Not quite," said Andy. "I don't suppose a girl ought—to know everything about—scraps!"

CHAPTER XII

THE "UNPLANNED" PLANS

CORA was always a pretty girl, but in her corn-colored, empire gown, that morning at the breakfast table, even her own brother was forced to express openly his admiration for her.

"Whew, Cora!" he exclaimed, "but you do look like a—tea-rose in that wrapper."

"Jack, dear, this is not a wrapper, but the very best design in empire," and she smoothed out the fullness that lay about her.

"Well, it's all right, anyway," declared Jack. "Makes me think of rose leaves, the way it clings about you."

"What a pretty speech, brother. Now, if that had only been saved up for Bess, or Belle or Hazel! By the way, we haven't seen Hazel this summer. I suppose she is studying as hard as ever. What a pity a bright girl like Hazel is not bright enough to save her health by taking the regulation vacation."

"Well, with Paul away I suppose Hazel thinks there is nothing left to do but study. I never saw brother and sister more attached," remarked Jack, taking his fruit from the dainty leaves in which, when Cora "kept house," she always insisted that fruit be served.

Paul and Hazel Hastings were indeed devoted brother and sister. Paul was also a devotee of the motor, and more than the amateur chauffeur, yet not quite the professional. He had an interesting part to play in the story "The Motor Girls On a Tour." But Cora had just remarked, Hazel had not been with them during the summer in which this story took place, and, as Jack further explained, this was due to the fact that Paul Hastings, after a severe illness, had taken a position to operate a car abroad, Mr. Robinson having arranged the "business end," in recognition of Paul's heroic work for Mr. Robinson in a mysterious robbery.

"But Belle had a letter from Hazel," said Jack, after some thought, the trick of which was not lost on Cora. "Yes, she said Hazel might go away with them. And now, sis, where are they going, anyway? Come, haven't I waited long enough for that secret?"

"It really isn't any secret, Jack, but the girls

have a baby way of wanting to keep things to themselves until all the preparations are made. I find it convenient to—keep my affairs to myself, so you see, dear, I have a selfish motive in humoring the others."

Cora's cheeks lighted under the cascade of shadows that fell from her splendid black hair. Jack saw, too, that his "little sister" was growing up, and even in her summer plans there were things other than flounces and frills to be considered.

The lighter vein of their conversation had been taken up after Cora had told her brother all that she felt it was prudent to tell about Andy's early morning call. And now——

"Well, I suppose you are determined to see the detective fellows," said Jack, moving Cora's chair out so that she might more easily leave the table.

"What else can I do?" she asked, and answered at once, with her decisive tone of voice.

"I think with Andy—you ought to 'git away,' " and Jack smiled in imitating the earnest youngster.

"And make matters look as if I were more deeply involved than I really am? Now, Jack, dear, that is not like you."

"No matter what you make matters look like, so long as you don't make them look like themselves," replied the boy. "That's my brand of logic in a case like this. Don't you see, sis, you may throw them off the track, and by getting a chance to talk with you, they are bound to find out something, or lose their badges."

Cora's face was bent in the roses that stood on the serving table. "But what could I do?" she asked, this time with less decision.

"Anything. Just take a run to—the beach—or anywhere. Leave me to see the officers."

The rapid tooting of horn of the *Flyaway* interrupted them.

"My!" exclaimed Cora, "more early morning callers? There's Bess!"

And, true enough, there was Bess, guiding her car up the drive, her veil flying in the breeze, and her cheeks like the very roses that outlined the path.

"Why the where-for-ness?" demanded Jack. "I am startled—collapsed—I might say, by the suddenness of this—pleasure——"

"Now, Jack," and Bess had alighted from her car, "you are not to make jokes, we haven't time. I am almost dead from hurrying. Mother de-

cided, about midnight last night, that we should go to——"

Then she stopped. How silly it would be to blurt out in one mouthful all the story of their secret planning!

"Oh, go ahead," said Jack with a light laugh. "I am deaf and dumb, also blind and halt. I have no idea where you are going. A trip over the Rockies——"

"Come in, Bess dear," said Cora, "and leave the boy to himself. You are certainly out of breath, and——"

Cora drew the arm of her friend within her own, and with all sorts of glances at Jack, who was actually seated in the *Flyaway* to make sure that the girls would not get away without his knowledge, Bess and Cora passed into the house.

"We are going to-day," went on Bess. "Mother wants our Western friends to have an outing at the beach—they have never been to salt water—and, as they must start back in a few days, we have to go to-day. Can you come?"

"How could I—go, this very day?"

"Why, we won't start until afternoon. And you have everything ready," urged Bess. "It will be fun. We'll stop over night at a hotel and reach the shore next day."

It seemed to Cora that all the powers were conspiring to get her out of Chelton that day, and it also seemed as if it might be rash to oppose such a force. True, she did have everything ready, and her household matters were always in such shape she could leave the servants on an hour's warning. Bess saw that Cora was uncertain, and she hurried to take advantage of the possible favorable opportunity.

"Oh, Cora, do come! What a perfectly stupid time we would have on that long run with just mama and the others. We wanted to go in the *Flyaway* and let them go by train, but, of course, mama would not hear to that. So now papa has hired a big machine and a chauffeur from the garage and Belle and I will go in our *"Bird,"* while the others travel near us in the hired car. Don't you see, if you go along with the *Whirlwind* what a splendid time we shall have?"

"Let's tell Jack—or ask him," said Cora finally. "He knows we are getting ready for some trip, and I guess we can trust him not to tell the other boys."

"Don't you want the other boys to know?" asked Bess, a tone of disappointment in her voice.

"Do you?" asked Cora, mischievously.

"Oh, I suppose they will find it out. And be-

sides, Cora, honestly, don't you think we would be—lonely without—the boys?"

Cora burst into a merry laugh. "There, Bess, my dear, you have broken the watchword—you are to be responsible for the boys. We pledged ourselves, as we always do, to 'keep them out' this time."

When Jack heard the news he hugged Cora in the very presence of Bess. The sister knew what he meant (it was getting away from the detectives), although Bess was somewhat embarrassed at the extravagant show of affection. Then Jack did what a boy does "when in doubt," he started a series of somersaults and sofa pillow turns, until Cora declared he quite forgot that he was in the company of ladies.

With profuse apologies he assumed an unwonted show of dignity, and without another word went upstairs and called up first Ed and then Walter on the telephone, telling each all he knew, and all he could guess about the trip to Lookout Beach, and fairly begged the boys to go along!

"I am afraid the girls will have to spoil their trip if we don't go," he said to Ed, who had made a half excuse, "for they really couldn't travel along that road without us!"

And this in the very face of the fact that the

elders were going along, and that the girls had declared that no boys *could* go!

"Won't there be high jinks!" Jack asked, and he told himself, with a jolly chuckle, as he hung up the receiver and went down to the girls, that if any "jinks" were lacking, it would not be his fault.

"Too bad we fellows can't take you out a little way," he said, innocently, as he came downstairs, "but the fact is, we have made plans—our plans are still secret!" and Jack ran down the walk like the big boy that he was in spite of his few years of good record at college.

Turning as he reached the street, he shouted: "Oh you—secrets!" then Cora and Bess were left alone.

"Well, I suppose I can go," said Cora, finally, "although it does seem strange to leave town in such haste. But after all, if I remain longer, I shall only find more things to be attended to, and I will be just as well off to—escape from them."

Bess was delighted, of course. She knew Cora so well, and she had grave fears that the methodical young girl would not run away at such short notice, but, now that she had gained her chum's consent, Bess had need to hurry back and finish up her own preparations.

Jack was on his way to the post-office, when he saw the now familiar figure of little Andy. He hailed him pleasantly, and the boy lost no time in hurrying up to the tall young man who waited for him.

"Now, Andy," began Jack, "suppose you tell me about those women—those who are after my sister. When did they say they were coming to Chelton?"

"I heard them tell the—the men that they would come in on the two o'clock trolley," said Andy, "and that was the reason I thought it would be better fer your sister to be—out of town. Is she goin'?"

"I guess she is," replied Jack, much amused at the boy's earnestness. "But she has no reason, you know, to want to avoid any one."

Andy hung his head. Then he thrust his hands into his pockets. This latter gesture Jack knew was equivalent to preparing for a sudden shot of information.

"It looks bad," said the boy, timidly.

"What looks bad?" demanded Jack.

"Well," said Andy, "maybe you won't believe me, but it was just this way. I was under the window listening, when all of a sudden old Ramsy took out of her pocketbook a slip of paper. She

handed it to the man, and said that she had found it in the girls' room, and that she was sure that your sister gave it to Rose, for she saw her slip something into her hand as Rose went out from the shed. The man read what was on the paper and then put it on the window sill. A nice little breeze came along——"

"And blew it right out to you," finished Jack, not attempting to hide his surprise at the boy's astuteness.

"Yep, and I've got it right here," Andy declared, jabbing his hand into his torn blouse, and then from the depths of what might have been a handkerchief, had it not been beyond identification, he produced a card.

"That's my sister's card," said Jack, still showing surprise. Then he turned to the reverse side. He read the words, written in pencil: Clover Cottage—Lookout Beach. "That's nothing," he added, "that's the cottage where my sister is going to spend the summer. She wrote it on the card for a memorandum, I suppose, and forgot about it."

"But Nellie and Rose had it in their room," persisted Andy.

"Perhaps my sister asked them to write to her," went on Jack, wondering why he bothered so much with the idle chat of an ignorant urchin.

"Well, Mrs. Ramsy said if she could get hold of the girl that gave that card to her girls, she would not wait for judge or justice but she would —well, she said she would do lots of things."

Jack laughed outright. "Now, see here," he went on, finally, "you had better take this car back to Squaton, Andy. You have been away from home for a long time, and the first thing you know they will have detectives looking for you. Or, maybe, they will say—you ran after the girls!"

It was not like Jack to joke in that strain, but the lad looked so comical, and he said such serious things in contrast to his appearance, that for the life of him, Jack could not resist the temptation to tease him.

"Nope. I'm not goin' home," declared Andy. "Mom knows where I am, and I am goin' to stay in town till the two o'clock trolley comes in."

"To meet the Ram and the Schenk?" asked Jack, laughing. "Then at least take this change, and look the town over. Buy some ice cream and —a brick bat or two to have ready when——"

"There's a fellow I know," interrupted Andy, and taking the proffered coin, he was soon lost to Jack, and to the business of detecting the detectives.

CHAPTER XIII

GOING AND COMING

THE weather was uncertain—it might rain, but there were cobwebs on the grass, which meant "clear." But the sun did not come out, and it was past noon.

These unfavorable conditions were unusual on a day when the motor girls were to make a run, but Bess, Belle and Cora were almost too busy with their preparations to pay much heed to the possibility of rain while en route.

The start was to be made at two o'clock, and the chimes on the dining room mantel of the Kimball home had just warned Cora that half the hour between one and two had gone by.

"We take no note of time but from its flight," quoted Cora to herself, hurrying through the room to crowd a last few things into her motor trunk. "I wonder where Jack is?"

At that very moment Jack's inevitable whistle was heard, and the next, the boy was in the room,

looking as deliciously lazy as ever, in that way so peculiar to boys who have a great deal to do at the time; the science of which studied indifference is absolutely impossible for a girl to fathom.

"Why this fluttering fluster, sis?" he asked, crumbling deeper in the leather-cushioned chair. "You will positively get over-heated and ruin—your—complex—ion!" This last was drawled out with the most aggravating yawn.

"Why, Jack, I have to be in my car at ten minutes to two, and do you see the time?"

"No, but I hear it. I wonder who on earth put a clock to ticking. Bad enough to hear the hours knock, but this constant tick——"

"Jack, whatever you have to say to me please say it," interrupted the sister. "I know perfectly well that this preamble is portentous."

"No, it's merely pretentious," answered Jack, drawing from his pocket the card that Andy had turned over to him. "Do you happen to remember where you dropped this?"

It was a simple guess, but Jack tried it.

"Dropped that?" repeated Cora, taking the card from his hand. "Why, I declare! I have looked everywhere for that. I wanted it last night. I had actually forgotten the name of the

cottage, and I wanted to give it to you for your note book. Where did you find it?"

"Didn't find it, it found me. Andy gave it to me."

"Andy!" and Cora's eyes showed her surprise.

"Yes. He said the old lady, Ramsy, found it in your strawberry girls' room."

"Whatever are you talking about, Jack?" demanded Cora with some impatience. "Don't you know I have to hurry, and you are teasing me this way?"

Jack went over to his sister, and put his bare brown arm around her neck. She looked up from the folding of her trinkets, and smiled into his face.

"Now, see here, sis," he said, "I am telling you the exact truth, and when I say exact, I mean exact. Andy told me he caught this card on a fly as it flew out the Ramsy window, when they were letting fly their opinions about the motor girls. Andy caught the card on the first bounce, stuck it in his pocket—no, let me see! He carried it against his heart, between his second and third ribs——"

"Oh, I know!" interrupted Cora. "I dropped that in the shed when I opened my purse to pay

for the berries. I thought I felt something slip from my hand."

"There," and Jack made a comical effort to pat himself on the back. "Jack, my boy, you are a wonder! If you don't know what you want just guess it."

"And they said I gave that card to the girls? To give them a place to run away to, I suppose."

"That was it," replied her brother. "You see, old lady Ramsy has an idea you want to abduct those girls. But it was a lucky breeze that blew the card to Andy. Otherwise you might expect an early call at Clover Cottage from the honorable Mrs. R of the Strawberry Patch."

"As if there was anything strange about me dropping my own personal card," mused Cora aloud. "And what difference did it make who might pick it up?"

The clock gave the alarm that the hour was about to strike. Cora jumped up and slipped into her coat and bonnet.

"It seemed foolish for the Robinsons to hire a car to take their friends down when I am riding alone," she said, "but the girls made me promise not to offer my car, but to carry the bags in the tonneau—Bess and Belle expect to get as far as

possible from the—chaperone conveyance. Well, Jack dear, I am rather a naughty sister to run away, and leave you thus, when mother specially intrusted you to my safekeeping. But you have compelled me to go, haven't you?"

"Forced you to," admitted Jack, picking up the bag and following her to the door.

The maids were in the hall waiting to assist Cora, and to bid her good-bye. A word of kind instruction to each, and Cora jumped into the car. Jack, having cranked up, took his place beside her.

"I will go as far as the trolley line," he said. "I want to see if Andy takes that two o'clock car when it turns back."

There were many little things to be spoken of between brother and sister, and, as they drove along, Cora referred more than once to the visit of the detectives. Jack assured her that he would attend to them and then, reaching the turnpike, where the trolley line ended, he bade her good-bye, jumped out, and, for a moment, watched the pretty car, and its prettier driver, fly down the avenue.

The next moment a trolley car stopped at the switch. From the rear platform two elderly ladies alighted rather awkwardly. They were queerly dressed, and the larger, she in the gingham gown,

with the brown shirred bonnet, almost yanked the other from the steps to the ground, in attempting to assist her.

"The Ramsy and the Schenk!" Jack told himself. "Cora did not get away any too soon!"

The women turned to the other side of the road. As they did, Jack felt a tug at his coat.

"That's them," said Andy, almost in a whisper, "and there come the two detectives! If you like you can stay away from your house, and I will lay around, and find out what happens!"

"Why, they will want to see me!" declared Jack, in some surprise at the suggestion.

"Suppose they do? Let them want," answered the urchin. "If I was you I'd just lay low. My mother always says 'the least said is the easiest mended,' and she knows."

The advice, after all, was not unwise, Jack thought. He had other things to attend to besides talking to a pair of foolish women, and answering the questions of a pair of well-paid detectives.

"Maybe you're right, Andy," he said. "I believe I am busy this afternoon. But take care that you don't get in the scrap. They will be bound to have revenge on some one."

Andy sprang back of the car to avoid being ob-

served by the women, as they turned to see which way they should go. Jack was not afraid of being noticed by the women, and he was a stranger to the detectives. The latter directed the women to walk over to the avenue, and then they followed at a "respectful distance."

Andy slunk out from his corner, darted off in the opposite direction, and Jack knew he would be at the Kimball homestead considerable in advance of the others.

"The Imp of the Strawberry Patch," thought Jack, in his usual way of making a story from a title. "He's a queer little chap, but not so slow, after all. How very much more reasonable it is for me to turn in and talk with Ed and Walter, than to go back home and jab answers at that quartette."

Then the thought of Cora's word (that she would see the detectives) crossed his mind. For a moment he almost changed his resolution. Then he decided:

"All's fair in love and war, and if this isn't war, it's a first-class sham battle."

Andy was out of sight. The last "rays" of the two country skirts could just be made out, as their owners trudged along the avenue, and Jack Kimball took up his tune, where he had left it

off, thrust his hands into his pockets, and sauntered off in the direction of the town garage.

As he anticipated, both Ed and Walter were there, putting Walter's machine in ship-shape for the run after the girls.

"Are you sure, Jack Kimball," demanded Ed, "that the young ladies will be in no way put out by our rudeness? I have a particular desire to please the ladies."

"Oh, you'll please them, all right," replied Jack, taking a seat on the step of a handsome car, just in front of the one his friends were busy at. "There is nothing on earth pleases a girl so much as to run after her, when she distinctly says you shall not go."

"Hear ye! The expert!" called out Walter, as he rubbed the chamois over the brass lamps at the front of his runabout. "Jack happens to know all about the game. Don't you remember the success of our hay-mobile run last year, when we went after the girls on their tour? Well, take it from me, the event this year will be equally disastrous—only more so," and Walter gave a last flourish to the lamp-polisher, then did a few fancy steps, in front of the car, to see that the reflection was correct.

"What time do we start?" asked Ed.

"Soon as we are ready," replied Jack. "The girls have already gone on, and I promised Mr. Robinson that we would keep just near enough to be within call, should they need us, but far enough away to be out of danger of their—Walter, what do you call it when a girl declares she can't bear a thing, and she just loves it?"

"Oh, that's—that's good taste," replied Walter, running his hands through his hair with the doubtful purpose of removing from them some of their lately acquired gasoline and polishing paste.

"Then, according to Walt, we must keep at a respectful distance from their good taste," finished Jack.

"You are sure—the ghost works all right?" asked Walter. "There is nothing more disgusting than a ghost that refuses to work."

"Oh, my ghost is a regular union man—eight hours and all that," replied Ed. "I've tried it on the chickens, and they almost turned into pot-pie from actual fright."

"And what time are we counting on getting to a putting-up place?" Walter asked further. "If we leave here about three, will we get anywhere in time to—have breakfast, for instance?"

"Well, my machine is in fine shape," declared

Jack, "and I just count on the *Get There* beating your little *Comet* if yours is a newer machine. With this calculation we should get to the Wayside by eight o'clock. The motor girls are going to put up there for the night, and we may be able to put *down* there, if it appears out of good style for us to put *up* there."

"Why didn't they go right on—start in time to reach the beach to-night?" inquired Ed.

"Oh, just a whim. Girls want all that's coming to them, and a night at a Wayside they count among their required experiences, don't you know. And the old folks being along made it particularly all right," declared Jack.

"But they'll beat us by an hour now," almost sighed Walter, who was becoming famous among his chums for his keen interest in the girls and their doings.

"Not much," answered Jack. "They are going the long way 'round. Do you suppose they would go over the new road? Why, the dust would blind Cora if she made a single mile of that grind and grit."

"Well, after my beauty bath, I'll be about ready," observed Walter. "Ed, don't put too much witch-hazel on your locks. Makes me

think of the day after fourth of July, when I went to grandmama's."

"Not half as bad as your new gloves. They give me a regular spell of the pig skin fever. I'll bet they're made out of junk, and you got stuck. Three dollars for a pair of gloves to save your lily-white hands—your lily-white hands!" and he ended in the strain of the familiar college song.

"Well, I'll be going," said Jack. "See to it that neither of you fellows do so much primping that we miss our—guess," and with that the three young men parted, each going his own way to make ready for the run after the motor girls.

CHAPTER XIV

LOST ON THE ROAD

"Look out there, Walter. Do you want the *Comet* to run into the *Whirlwind?*"

"We are getting pretty close," answered Walter, shutting off the power and coasting with the emergency brake partly on, for he found he was covering a hill too quickly. "I guess we can run alongside here. It's a good enough road."

Jack brought the *Get There* in line with the other runabout. "My, but that shower is coming up quickly. I'll bet the girls are about scared to death," he said. "Cora isn't particularly afraid of thunder showers, but I know Belle is."

"Then, they will have to put up somewhere before they get to Wayside," remarked Ed. "That thunder is not far away."

As he said this a blinding flash of lightning confirmed the statement.

"I wonder if that chauffeur Mr. Robinson

hired, knows any place to put up at?" asked Jack, his voice showing some anxiety.

"Well, there doesn't happen to be any place on this road," replied Ed. "I came along here last week, and the only thing like a hotel I could find, was an old roadhouse over on a back lane."

"My, but that's sharp lightning!" exclaimed Walter. "Guess I had better get ahead, Jack. It's safer now."

For a mile or so the runabouts went along, "between the flashes," as Ed put it. Then the rain came, pelting and with a tempestuous wind.

"Where's the turn, Ed?" asked Jack. "We'd better hurry on and overtake the girls now. I don't feel like risking it in this downpour. That fellow from the garage may not know more than he has to, and I promised Mr. Robinson I'd sort of look after the girls."

"Listen!" exclaimed Walter. "I don't hear the cars, do you?"

Both runabouts slowed up, and their occupants did not speak for some seconds.

"But where could they have gone to?" questioned Jack, as their strained ears failed to catch the familiar sound of a machine that had been running on ahead.

All the joy of the stolen ride instantly vanished.

Jack Kimball, Ed Foster, and Walter Pennington were no longer the jolly, laughing youths, chasing the motor girls. They were three very much frightened young men, for the girls, and the car in which the other members of the Robinson family had been riding, could neither be seen nor heard!

Through the pouring rain the boys dashed on. The rays of light from the search-lamps revealed nothing but a stretch of mud that, every moment, became deeper and more treacherous!

Then came a fork in the road, and beside the turn, a lane offered a possible clue to the sudden departure of the girls from the main highway.

"We've got to get out and look for their tracks," said Jack. "I suppose they put on all kinds of speed to get away from the rain."

But although the other cars must have passed over that place somewhere, and not more than half an hour before, not a mark of the heavy wheels could be discerned in the deep, dark mud, though Jack took off one of the oil lamps and flashed it across the road.

"Golly!" exclaimed Ed, in earnest despair.

"Which way?" asked Walter, deferring now to the much-alarmed brother of Cora Kimball.

"I wish I knew," replied he, with a sigh.

"Suppose we make straight for the Wayside?" suggested Ed. "They may have known of the roadhouse."

"How far to Wayside?" asked Jack.

"Five miles from this turn. See, there it is on the signpost," and he flashed his lamp on the board that marked the fork in the road.

"Then we had better put on speed and make that," declared Jack, "and if we do not find them there, we will have to turn back, that's all."

"Didn't Cora have any idea you were going to follow?" asked Walter, as he got back in his car and then shot ahead close to the already moving *Get There*.

"Not the least," replied Jack. "That comes of our foolish way of doing school-boy tricks. It seems to me the joke is turned on us this time."

"Hope it is," declared Walter warmly. "I, for one, am now quite willing to go in the kindergarten, if that's all we have to do to make amends."

"I can't see where we missed them," almost shouted Jack, for the noise of the thunder and rain added to the distance of sound between the cars.

"Right at the spot where you told me to slow

up," answered Walter. "I heard them then, but not after that."

Each driver now put on all possible speed. It was a perilous ride. The mud splashed up in the very faces of the young men, the lights that flashed on the road were misleading, because of the almost continuous flashes of lightning, and the danger of "skidding" increased with every mile of the race.

"Who were in the hired car?" called Walter.

"Mrs. Robinson and her guest from the West, and the driver. I wish now I had gone over and fixed it, so that they had the right man at the wheel," yelled Jack. "I don't know a thing about this fellow."

"What's his name?" asked Ed.

"Bindle or something like that," was Jack's answer.

Ed gave Walter a tug at the sleeve. "Don't say anything to Jack," he said, quietly, "but that's the very fellow who drove the Wakleys when they went over into the ditch."

The shrill whistle of a train startled them.

"Any other danger likely to crop up?" asked Jack. "This will surely give the girls all the experience they want, I'm afraid!"

But a few more miles and they must reach the inn.

If only they would find the party there safe and sound!

None of the boys was what might be called nervous, but when it came to possible danger for the motor girls—Jack's sister, his friends and his chum's friends—somehow a fear seized each of the three young men; a fear to which they had thought themselves almost immune.

"There's the lights from the Wayside," announced Jack, a little later, and then they turned their cars into the broad, private roadway.

Jack was first to reach the hotel office, but Ed and Walter were almost at his heels.

"Has a party of automobile folks come in here since eight o'clock?" he asked of the man at the desk.

"Yes," replied the clerk, turning over one page of the big book.

The boys' hearts gave a sort of jerk—it must be their girls, of course.

"Have they registered?" went on Jack. "Were there three cars, and a number of girls?"

The man looked down the list of names.

"Here they are," he said, indicating some fresh writing on the page.

Jack scanned it eagerly.

Then he looked at Ed and Walter.

"Not them!" he almost gasped. "We have got to turn back!"

"Make sure they have not come in, and are on some porch," said Ed. "They may not have had a chance to get into the office."

But all inquiries failed to give any clue to the lost party, and, without waiting for any refreshments, the almost exhausted young men cranked up their muddy cars, and started off again over the very road they had just succeeded in safely covering.

"We've got to have more spunk if we intend to find them," said Ed, for Jack seemed too overcome to speak. "Why, they may be snug by some farm-house fire, actually enjoying the situation."

"I hope so," faltered Jack. "But next time I'll *go along*—not after them," and he threw in high gear, advanced the spark and then they fairly flew over the turnpike, back to the fork that must have hidden the secret of the turn in the road.

CHAPTER XV

BOYS TO THE RESCUE

NEVER had a ride seemed so treacherous. Sharp turns threatened to overturn the cars and the brakes, on slippery hills, were of little use. Fortunately the engines of both machines were in perfect running order and in spite of the bad conditions of the roads the *Comet* and the *Get There* pegged along, through mud and slush, sometimes sinking deep in the former, and ploughing madly through the latter.

"I thought I saw a light," said Ed to Walter, after a period of hard driving.

"Where?" asked the pilot of the *Comet.*

"To the left—what place can that be?"

Jack's attention was called to a distant but faint gleam, and, presently, the runabouts had left the main road, and were chugging through the heaviest track they had yet encountered. They turned in between what seemed to be tall gate-posts.

"Why—this is—a graveyard!" exclaimed Jack, as the headlight fell on a shaft across a tall monument.

"Well that's—something, over there," declared Ed. "And I—see it—move!" He slackened the speed of the car.

"Now for real ghosts!" Walter could not refrain from remarking, although the situation was far from reassuring.

"This is a cemetery, all right," went on Jack. "What's the use of us ploughing over—graves? Let's get out. We took the wrong turn, I guess."

"Let's give a call," suggested Walter, at the same moment squeezing two or three loud "honk-honks" on his horn.

"Hark!"

"Honk! Honk! Honk—honk—honk!"

"That's Cora's signal," shouted Jack. "Hurry on ahead, Walter. They are some place in this cemetery."

But it was not so easy to hurry over the gruesome driveway, for it was narrow and uncertain, and the heavy rains had washed out so many holes, that the boys felt an uncanny fear that a sudden turn might precipitate them into some strange grave.

"Where are you!" yelled Jack at the top of his voice. "Turn on your lights!" pleaded Walter, without waiting for a possible answer. "We can't tell where you are!"

As quickly as it could have been possible to do so, the strong searchlight of a car (surely it was Cora's) gleamed over the shafts of stone, and marble, that now seemed like so many pyramids, erected to confuse the way of the alarmed young men.

"We can't cut over the headstones," almost growled Ed. "What on earth do folks want those things sticking up for?"

The absurdity of the remark was lost on the others.

"If the girls are around they must have been blown in here," declared Jack, making a sudden turn, and jamming the foot-brake to keep the machine on its wheels, while he released the clutch.

"Here! Here!" came the unmistakable voice of Cora.

"Which way?" Jack called back.

"Look out for the lake! Turn in from the vault!" came the voice again, and none too soon, for without the drivers having any idea of being

near a body of water, both runabouts a moment later, were actually on the very brink of a dangerous-looking lake.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Walter. "We nearly got ours that time. I'm going to get out and walk."

"Great idea," agreed Ed, and at the same time Jack also left his car.

More shouting and more answers soon put the searchers on the right track, and, although they were obliged to run over graves, and otherwise forget the sacredness of their surroundings, the trio soon brought up back of the vault, where the lamps of the *Whirlwind* and of the *Flyaway* told the first part of the strange story.

"Oh, boys!" gasped Belle and Bess in one breath.

"Jack!" exclaimed Cora.

"Thank fortune!" came the fervent words from Mrs. Robinson.

Jack had Cora in his arms before he could say a word, Walter and Ed divided themselves among the frightened group as best they could. Belle really fell into some one's arms, and Bess had difficulty in clinging to her trembling, little mother.

"Another moment in this dreadful place, and I should have died!" wailed Mrs. Robinson.

"And to think that it was all my fault, that

you came out just to let me—see the—ocean," cried the visitor, Miss Steel of Chicago. "I shouldn't have consented——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Bess. "You had nothing to do with the accident. It was all the fault of that—disgraceful—man. He is no more a chauffeur—than——"

"I knew he would do something dreadful!" put in Belle, who was sobbing hysterically, while Walter tried to comfort her.

For some moments the scene was one of confusion, punctuated with such remarks as would spring from the frightened lips unbidden by brain or effort. Then the storm seemed to suddenly clear away, and with the passing of the rain went the black blankets that had hidden the lights from the sky.

It seemed almost uncanny that the stars and moon should flash so suddenly over the heads of the party in the cemetery, and reveal to them the marble shafts, and granite headstones glaring in ghostly whiteness.

"Let's get out of here," spoke Jack, giving his terrified sister a reassuring hug. "Cora, you are drenched through!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I tried to be on the lookout," she stammered, "and so I could not keep under shelter."

"What on earth happened?" asked Ed, following Jack's example, and assisting Mrs. Robinson and Miss Steel over the rough mounds into the pathway.

"Suppose we delay investigations," suggested Walter. "The ladies have certainly had a most unpleasant experience."

"Unpleasant!" repeated Bess. "It was simply dreadful!"

"How long have you been here?" asked Jack.

"A life time!" ejaculated Belle.

"And we were just approaching the re-incarnate state," added Cora, with a desperate attempt at frivolity.

"Did you see any ghosts?" asked Ed, almost lifting the little Miss Steel over a rough spot.

"Did we!" mocked Belle.

"Oh, I mean the kind that—shine," explained Ed. "Not the mental species."

"Belle had a regular series of apparitions," declared Bess, now running from the terror state into one of extreme hilarity, the natural reaction from her awful experience.

"But we have to wait for that—chauffeur," wailed Mrs. Robinson.

"Why should we wait for him?" asked Jack.

"He has gone for something,—Cora knows," concluded the woman helplessly.

"Why, when I found my starting system was out of commission he said it was best for him to go and get new batteries. So he hurried off in his car, to go to the shop we passed out on the turnpike. It was then we discovered we were in the graveyard. He had turned in here by the merest accident. It was so dreadfully dark."

"He mistook this road for the one to Wayside," interrupted Belle.

"And ran off and left you in a cemetery," said Ed with a sneer.

"But we couldn't go on without the *Whirlwind,*" argued Cora. "Had it been one of the smaller cars that failed we might have managed."

"And he didn't try to fix your batteries?" inquired Walter.

"Why, he said he—couldn't," answered Cora in a tone of voice that betrayed her own suspicions.

"We really cannot go on without him," declared Mrs. Robinson, feeling that it was due to her matronly reputation to stand firm for the chauffeur.

"We really *must* go on without him," declared Jack. "Are we to catch our deaths of cold here,

waiting for the return of a man, who should never have gone away? I have an idea that the fellow was simply scared, and so left his post——"

"Oh, indeed!" interrupted Belle, "he did everything he could to fix the *Whirlwind,* but Cora declared it would not spark, and so he said he had to go for batteries. You see we could not possibly go on without the big car."

"Well, we will start off. If we should meet him on the road we might—speak to him," said Jack with a sort of growl, "but personally I don't think the fellow worth that much consideration."

"There will be plenty of room in all the good cars now," added Ed, "and we can come out tomorrow and get the *Whirlwind.*"

"But I cannot go, and leave my car behind," objected Cora. "I have never left it—on the road yet!"

"Let's look it over," suggested Jack, who knew very well that it would be next to impossible to induce Cora to go on without her machine.

Feeling secure now, the entire party set to the task of looking over the *Whirlwind,* even the ladies taking part by holding the lights, and otherwise assisting the young men, who went to work to put the ignition system back into commission.

It did not take the boys long to discover what was the trouble, and in a short time there was enough spark to start the *Whirlwind*. The car was cranked up, Jack was at the wheel, while Ed had put the *Get There* in a position to go ahead, and assumed control of the runabout.

It was not, however, so simple a matter to get the cars out of the cemetery, so the boys directed the girls and ladies to walk to the road, while the youths managed, by much twisting and turning, to run the machines to an open space. This finally accomplished, Mrs. Robinson got in the *Whirlwind,* while Miss Steel took her place with Ed in the *Get There.*

What a beautifully clear night had emerged from the folds of that storm!

And what a delightful thing it was to ride in safety after the dreadful experience of being "shipwrecked" in a graveyard!

"I wish we had invited you to come," said Belle to Walter and Jack, as the *Flyaway* glided on near the other cars.

"I wish we had come without being invited," amended Jack.

"Next time we will not try to keep secrets," declared Bess.

"Next time we will not let you have any to keep," insisted Jack, "especially if there is a road ride in the combination."

"What time is it?" asked Cora. "I haven't dared look at my watch."

"The magical hour," replied Ed. "It was a pity to leave the graveyard just then. It is exactly midnight."

"And there is a light by the road over there," went on Cora. "What ever could have induced that man to leave the road and drive down into the cemetery? He *must* have known."

"He's—well, wait until I get back to Chelton," threatened Jack. "I guess we will have some fun with that fellow's license."

"Had we better stop at that house, and get some refreshment for you?" asked Walter. "Or would you rather go right on to the Wayside, where you can remove your wet clothing?"

This last suggestion was considered the more practical, and very soon the *Whirlwind,* the *Comet,* the *Flyaway* and the *Get There* were gliding as smoothly over the wet and muddy roads, as if the machines had never put their occupants into the panic of fear and terror that had furnished the motor girls such a very thrilling experience.

"There are the Wayside lights!" announced Jack.

"Thank goodness!" said Mrs. Robinson, fervently. "I, for one, have had enough of night auto rides!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE SHADOW IN THE HEDGE

One hour later the motor party had put up safely at the Wayside, a comfortable, home-like place.

Of course the girls were disappointed that they could not enjoy any of the inn attractions that night, for a hop was in progress, but Mrs. Robinson insisted, and the young men reluctantly agreed with her, that it was not only wisest, but actually imperative that each one of the girls go directly to her room, take a warm bath and then a hot drink, and "get right into bed."

Cora and Jack, however, had a short talk over their tea cups, Cora insisting upon knowing just what was the matter with the ignition system of her car, for she declared, since it was so simple a matter for the young men to fix, it surely could not have been difficult for her to have understood and set it right. As the trouble was really noth-

ing more than the short circuiting of a wire, along with weak batteries, it was easy enough for Jack to explain it to her and how to remedy it.

On her part Cora had to tell her brother of the accident to the *Whirlwind,* and the sudden precipitation into the "City of the Dead," then the "escape" of the chauffeur, and the fright of all the party when "just girls and women" found themselves helpless and deserted in that lonely place.

Jack could not find words to express his indignation for the behavior of the man who was hired to take the party to the Wayside Inn. The ride from Chelton was one that might have been made safely under almost any road conditions, and from the Wayside to Lookout Beach the two ladies were to go by rail on the following morning.

"But suppose," ventured Cora, when, after a turn about the big porch, she was about to say good night to her brother, "that man goes back to that graveyard, and spends the night searching for us? We should have left a note, and a light at the door of the big vault."

"It would do that fellow all sorts of good to spend a night in a graveyard," returned Jack, "and, for my part, I would like to have the chance

to slide a vault door shut on him, and give him an hour or so of silent meditation."

"You haven't told me about the detectives," said Cora, who was standing at the door, reluctant to leave her brother. "What did they actually say, Jack?"

"The detectives!" he repeated vaguely. Then he recalled all about his positive engagement with the two officers—his engagement made to take Cora's place in the interview. And he had broken his word with Cora!

"Can't you tell me something they said?" she urged. "I know it is awfully late, and you can give me the details to-morrow, but I am so anxious to hear—just a word or two."

"Why, I didn't see them," he blurted out, finally.

"Didn't they come?"

"Not while I was—home."

"Then they must have been delayed—the trolleys from Squaton are so unreliable," said Cora. "I suppose they got to the house after you had started out? But I am not sorry you didn't wait for them," she added with a sigh, "else we might still be in the graveyard."

"Oh, yes," Jack put in quickly. "It was a mighty good thing we found you, but the mean

part of it was that we lost you. I had no idea of letting you get out of my sight, after we started."

He laughed strangely. But it was the thought of the detectives with the two odd women from the strawberry patch that occasioned the mirth.

"You must not laugh at us, Jack. It really was not a bit funny."

Jack put his arm about his sister. For one brief moment they stood there in the clear moonlight.

"Well, I must retire," said Cora, "although I feel more like sitting the night out. Good-night, Jack dear. We must be up with——"

She stopped. "What was that?" asked the young man, as a slight figure seemed to glide over the path at the very edge of the steps they stood facing.

"It—looked like a boy,—no, a girl," replied Cora, instinctively clutching her brother's arm.

"There it goes," Jack indicated, as the figure almost disappeared in the thick hedge. "I thought at first the boys might be up to some prank, but that 'ghost' walks too firmly to be a spirit."

"Queer for a girl to be out at this hour," reflected Cora. "I wonder who it can be, and what does she want, prowling about after midnight?"

"Want me to investigate?"

"What; run after it?"

"Or—whistle," he said jestingly.

Cora walked down the stone steps. She hesitated and listened. There was not a sound amid the leaves, through which the figure had just disappeared.

"I declare!" she said, "I feel creepy. I guess I had better go to bed. I have had enough of ghosts for one night."

Jack went with her up the stairs and left her at the door of the room she was to occupy. But he did not go farther down the hall, to the big room in the alcove, where he and his chums were to sleep, although he noticed that blades of light were escaping under the door which meant, of course, that Ed and Walter were waiting up for him.

"I'll just take another look for that specter," he told himself, going down the stairs noiselessly. "I rather think he, she, or it, had something to say either to me or Cora."

It was a curious thought, and Jack could not account for it, but he actually did make directly for the hedge where the streaks of moonlight fell, like silvery showers on the dark green foliage. A narrow path was outlined by a low hedge. He

walked down this dark aisle, peering into the banks of green at either side.

"Who's that?" he asked, as he distinctly heard a rustle, and at the same time saw the branches move.

No answer.

"Is there any one there?" he demanded, this time more emphatically.

Still no answer came.

Following the direction whence the movement and rustle came, Jack slipped under the hedge. As he did so a figure glided out, darted across the path, and ran toward the roadway.

As quickly as he could disengage himself from the tangled brush, Jack, too, ran down the path after the fast-disappearing shadow.

Again the figure made for the hedge.

Jack hesitated. If he followed in, the unknown one could slip out on the other side, and get away without the possibility of being overtaken.

Jack waited.

There was not a sound, or a movement.

Evidently the substance of the shadow was waiting for him to cross the hedge.

At this juncture he wished he had called the boys to aid him in the search. But it was too late to regret that omission now.

It seemed fully five minutes before either he, outside the hedge, or the figure within the green, moved. It was a silent challenge. Jack was determined now not to take the initiative.

"I can stand here until morning," he told himself. "But I will not get out of range of that person by any false move."

A full minute passed.

"Guess it has gone to sleep," he thought, at the same moment trying to suppress a distinct yawn.

Then he thought he saw something move. He stepped cautiously up to the trembling leaves. Like a shiver that swept through the silent darkness, the branches barely swayed.

"It's creeping along," he surmised. "Now, I have to move along with it."

With his steps quite as noiseless as those within the hedge, Jack did move toward the roadway. There the hedge would end, and something had to happen.

"Queer race," he was thinking, when all of a sudden, without any warning, the shadow sprang out of the branches, darted across the path not five feet from where Jack stood spellbound, and dashed on back to the hotel.

"Good-bye," called Jack lightly, realizing now

that the apparition was nothing more or less than a girl. "Think you might have let me take you, though."

He knew now that further watching would be useless, as the broad piazzas of the hotel, with endless basement steps, afforded such seclusion that he would find it impossible to penetrate, so he, too, turned back, and crossed the other side of the hedge, as he had done in coming down. Something in the bushes caught his eye, even in the shadows. It was a bundle of some sort. He stooped and touched it. Then he rolled it over. It was very light, and a small package.

"Guess it won't bite," he thought. "I may as well take it along," and with this he very cautiously picked up the package, and walked back to the hotel.

CHAPTER XVII

AT WAYSIDE INN

THE light still gleamed under the door of the alcove room. Jack was not sorry that he would have company in his bundle investigation.

"But Walter and Ed will blame me for not giving them the tip," he told himself. "We surely could have bagged that wild bird, if there only had been some one on the other side of the hedge."

Ed opened the door before Jack had time to knock.

"Where in the world have you been?" demanded the young man, who stood within the room, clothed in the splendor of a real athlete. "We had just about given you up. Who is she?"

"Search me?" replied Jack, laughing at the fitness of the slang and at the same time apologizing for its vulgarity. "If I only knew who she was I'd feel better."

"If he only knew who she was," repeated Walter, between a howl and a grunt.

"Oh, if he only knew," added Ed, dragging Jack into the room, and closing the door after him.

Then they saw the package. Walter grabbed it from Jack's hands. "Did she send it to us?" he asked, placing it comically on the washstand and making queer "passes" in front of it.

"It's for me," insisted Ed. "She promised to send me just that very bundle," and he yanked it from the stand and placed it on the mantel.

"Oh, for goodness sake, open it," interrupted Jack, glad of a good chance to get some one other than himself to attempt that uncertain proceeding.

"It's light," commented Ed, giving the ends of the package an undoing twist.

Walter and Jack leaned over very close. Ed stretched out his arms to keep them off.

Then the paper spread open and the contents were in full sight.

A mass of light-brown hair!

"Oh, you—murderer!" exclaimed Ed, as loudly as the hour would politely admit. "To scalp her!"

But Jack was more surprised than were his friends.

"A girl's hair!" he exclaimed.

"*Her* hair!" corrected Ed. "Oh, if he only knew who *she* was!" and his voice mocked the words Jack had uttered when he entered the room.

"Jack Kimball!" ejaculated Walter. "This is the 'unkindest cut of all.'"

"We denounce you!" added Ed. "This is outrageous!"

Jack looked closely at the severed locks. "A pretty color," he mused. "Sort of burnished gold!"

This attempt at the poetical brought the unrestrained wrath of his companions on his head, for both Walter and Ed simply "fell to," and pounded Jack "good and proper."

He begged for mercy. Then they did let him go.

"Now, honest Injun," started Walter, "tell us about it."

But the strange race through the hedge was really too unusual to be comprehended or believed at once. Still Jack insisted upon every detail of the affair, and his friends finally did believe a part of it, at least.

"And whose locks do you suppose they are?" asked Ed when the opportunity for that question arrived.

"If I—only—knew!" reiterated Jack.

"Let me see!" murmured the prudent Walter. "What was the shade of hair worn by the runaways of the strawberry patch? If I mistake not——"

"You win!" interrupted Jack. "They were strawberry blondes!"

"And it's as clear as the nose on your face that they had to cut the locks off—that they are here in the hotel at this very moment——"

He was actually jumping into his outer clothes.

"Where are you going?" demanded Jack.

"To find Rose," insisted Ed. "My Rose—or was she your Rose—and is she my Nellie?"

"For goodness sake, man!" wailed Jack, "don't make any further fuss around here to-night. The ladies and the girls will be scared to death if you start chasing my—shadow. We have got to-morrow to investigate. If the runaways are here to-night they will be here to-morrow."

"That sounds like good advice," assented Walter. "And if I don't get a little rest there will be great ugly dark rings under my eyes, and my complexion will simply be ruined."

"And his hair won't stay up," added Ed, taking up the girlish tone Walter had assumed. "Well, if you beauties must sleep suppose you go at it. I could snore looking at the floor," and Ed suited

his actions to the words, for very shortly, neither Walter nor Jack could compel him to answer a single question with so much as an intelligent grunt.

It seemed scarcely possible that daylight had come, when a tapping at the door awoke Jack.

"Jack," called Cora, "I must speak with you. Come out as soon as you can."

"Now what's up?" asked Ed with a yawn.

"We've got to get up," replied Walter, "and since you managed to get to sleep first, we will give you first whack at the wash basin."

"Thanks, but help yourself, Wallie," said Ed, turning over on his single bed, three of which sort were stretched out across the long old-fashioned room. "This is a fine day for sleeping."

But in spite of the young man's determination to " prolong," he was compelled, by his companions, to join them in a quick washing and dressing act, and then take breakfast with the motor party on the broad side-porch.

Mrs. Robinson was ill—that was the important piece of information that Cora wished to disclose to Jack.

"We must stay here to-day," insisted Belle, "for mamma could never bear to travel with one of

her bad headaches. Of course she could not avoid one after the awful experience of last night."

"Well, this place isn't half bad," declared Jack, showing his positive regard for the breakfast before him. "We might all do worse than spend a day at the Wayside."

He was thinking of the advantage that the stay would give him in making a search for the girl who had lost her package of newly-cut hair. He had not as yet had an opportunity to consult with Cora; in fact, there seemed plenty to do at the Wayside, and it would all require time.

Mrs. Robinson insisted that the young folks enjoy themselves, and go wherever they wished, as she declared, she would be better and quieter with her friend Miss Steel. Miss Steel herself felt none too good after the experience and wetting of the past night, so the two ladies were not annoyed by unnecessary fussing, and unneeded attention.

"Isn't this a wonderful old place, though?" commented Walter, as he, with the others had finished the meal, and all were about to go out exploring. "Did you see the fireplace in the dining-room?"

Thereupon all hands repaired again to the great

big old-fashioned dining room, where a few rather delicate-looking persons were still lingering over their coffee.

A waitress, in cap and apron, flitted about the apartment. A second girl brought some extra fruit to a little man, who sat against the wall in the corner, and as the two girls met at the buffet Jack heard the remark:

"Wasn't it mean for them to leave without notice? It will give *us* a good day's work."

"Yes," replied the second girl, "and napkin day, too. Weren't they in a hurry to get away, though? You'd think some one was after them!"

A titter from the older girl was interpreted to mean that no one could possibly be after those spoken of. Then both girls picked up some odds and ends from different tables, and left the room.

Jack's heart sank—if a boy's heart ever does anything like that. At least, his hope of finding the runaway girls was, for the time, shattered. He was instantly convinced that the persons to whom the waitresses referred, could be none other than those who were so ardently sought by the motor girls. He was also just as thoroughly convinced that the runaways had already started on a new trail, and were beyond his reach.

Cora, Bess and Belle were in ecstacies over the

antique settings of the big room, while Ed and Walter were doing what they could to emphasize the glories of a "side walk," as they termed the broad stones, in front of the fireplace.

"Fine for fire crackers on a wet Fourth," said Walter foolishly.

"Splendid for walnuts on a cold night," put in Ed with something like common sense.

Jack slipped out unnoticed. He went directly to the inn office.

"If only the girls had not yet left the place," he was hoping. "And to think that I should have let them slip through my fingers like that! Cora will begin to lose faith in me," he reflected. "When she finds out that I have not seen the detectives, and when she really identifies the hair as that of——"

At the office he was informed that all the servants of Wayside Inn were in charge of the housekeeper, whose office he would find at the rear, near the pergola.

Thither Jack betook himself. He found the office without any difficulty, but the housekeeper was very busy, and could not see him at once. The wait was vexatious, but Jack amused himself with noting the peculiar furnishings of the room, that served for an office. It looked more like a big

clothes closet for white aprons and gingham aprons, while all sorts of towels were hung around in abundance.

Maids came in and took white aprons, but the presence of a young man evidently prevented them from arranging the swiss ties and sashes there, so those who seemed in a hurry went out with freshly laundered articles on their arms.

Several remarks that Jack overheard seemed to relate to the girls who had left recently, and although he was on the alert to gather any possible definite information, none was forthcoming.

Finally the little window back of a shelf was raised, and the head of an elderly woman was framed therein.

Jack stepped up to the "ticket office." "Are there two girls named Catron employed here?" he asked.

"I have never had any help of that name," the woman replied, promptly, but politely.

"Perhaps they have used some other name," ventured the young man, feeling decidedly ill at ease.

"Why?" asked the housekeeper who, Jack learned, was Miss Turner.

"Well, the girls I am searching for—ran away from their home," he blurted out.

"Oh my!" exclaimed the woman. "I hope no such young ladies would present themselves at the Wayside Inn."

"They might," ventured Jack. "You see, the girls were not altogether to blame. They were orphans, and did not have a good home."

The woman looked puzzled. "I wonder if they could have been the two girls who were here yesterday?" she said. "They left early this morning, and I so much wanted them to stay to-day. Could you describe them?"

"Well, I am afraid not," said Jack, "but my sister is a guest here, and it is she who is interested in these poor girls." Jack felt infinitely better now that he had, in a measure, cleared himself of a personal interest in the runaways.

"If you will wait until I give a few dinner orders," said Miss Turner, "I will go with you and talk with your sister. I am always willing, and anxious, to assist needy young girls."

This offer was accepted with thanks, and presently Jack conducted the matron to the private parlor, where he knew he would be able to arrange a quiet talk between her and Cora.

CHAPTER XVIII

LOOKOUT BEACH

"Isn't it perfectly dreadful!"

"Simply awful!"

"It surely isn't true!"

"But it's there—every word of it!"

These exclamations burst from the lips of Belle and Bess Robinson, as the two sisters smoothed a newspaper out before their startled eyes.

"And this paper was found at the Wayside," went on Bess. "No wonder the poor girls ran away again!"

"When we get to the cottage I am going to ask Cora all about it," declared Belle. "It does not seem right that a newspaper should hint at anything that is not plainly stated! That about the young ladies from Chelton who rode in autos—every one will know means us."

The girls were in the *Flyaway,* going along a sea cliff road, only a few miles outside of the pretty summer resort of Lookout Beach. The

roaring of the ocean could be plainly heard now, the salt of the spray was in the air, and the sun glinted on the white roads. Bess and Bell, in their car, had gone on ahead, the others followed at a distance.

"Isn't the air glorious!" cried Bess. "I am sure we are going to have a delightful time down here."

"And wasn't it lovely of mamma to invite the boys?" added Belle. "Of course she felt perfectly helpless with just us girls; and Jack is so resourceful!"

"Yes, I fancy it might have been rather lonely evenings without the boys. Of course we will have to stay around the cottage evenings, and with them we will have some opportunity for fun."

"Ed says they are going to take a bungalow almost on the beach," remarked Belle. "It will be fun to see how they keep house."

The *Flyaway* dropped back nearer the little procession of other autos that now wended their way along the seaside boulevard to the peninsula that looked out over the bay, across the great noisy ocean, and out—out—it seemed almost to Eternity.

It was here, on this point of land, that the cottages were grouped, and it was this exceptional

view that gave the pretty spot its name—Lookout Beach.

"Quite a pretty village," Cora remarked to Jack, as they drove through the center of the place.

"Plenty of fishing around here," said Ed to Walter, as the boys' car slacked along the board sidewalk, and its occupants observed numbers of men and boys slouching along, with baskets, evidently well filled with the night's catch.

The *Whirlwind* stopped at the post-office, and Cora stepped out to ask the exact direction to Clover Cottage. She glanced in the box, the number of which Bess and Belle had given her as the one that "went with" their cottage. Two pieces of mail had already arrived and these were handed to Cora by the old man who made it his particular business to welcome every "box holder" to Lookout Beach.

"The first road to the left," the postmaster told her as she emerged from the office, and the *Whirlwind* again led the way to the cottage.

The hanging sign "Clover" left no doubt as to which was the particular cottage and here the four cars and their merry passengers pulled up, and stopped.

"Welcome to Clover!" exclaimed Bess and Belle in chorus.

"Three cheers for the welcome!" replied Jack, in as loud a voice as the proximity to other cottages would allow.

"But the house is not open!" declared Bess, who was first to reach the porch. "Nettie was to have come down yesterday."

"Why, yes," added Belle. "Mother will be dreadfully put out if she gets here and we have no maid——"

"Oh, don't worry about that," Ed interrupted. "Since we have been invited, we will attend nicely to any little thing like opening up house, and setting up housekeeping," and without further ceremony he undertook to explore each window on the broad veranda, and soon he had one pair of shutters unfastened, and was opening a sash without the slightest difficulty.

"Was that window unlocked?" asked Belle. "Why, our things might have been stolen!"

"Just wait until I open the door," ordered Ed, "then you there—Walter and Jack—you may take the job of portering."

"I'd rather 'buttle,'" objected Walter. "There's more in it. First shot at buttling!"

It seemed jolly already. The door was thrown open, and Ed made all sorts of bows and bends in inviting the ladies to enter.

In the sitting room a paper dangled from the lamp that hung in the center of the apartment.

"Directions!" announced Jack. "Don't blow out the gas! Don't waste the water! Don't break any dishes!"

He had taken the paper down. The room was rather dark, and he stepped to the door to read the penciled words.

"It's for—Cora," he announced. "Now who on earth knew that Cora Kimball was coming down to Clover!"

They all stood spellbound!

That a letter for Cora should hang there in a cottage closed up—certainly the doors had not been opened!

Cora took the folded paper from Jack's hand.

"More—ghosts!" sighed Belle. "Somehow this whole trip has been——"

"Ghost-bound!" interrupted Walter. "Well, what does this particular ghost want, Cora?"

"It's a note—from Rose and Nellie," she announced. "They have been here—and—wait, let me read it."

"'DEAR MISS KIMBALL,'" she read aloud. "'We came to your cottage last night. I hope you will forgive us. We did not sleep in any bed,

but slept on the floor. We washed all the dishes this morning, and cleaned down the pantry shelves to pay for our night's lodging. We are dreadfully discouraged, and when you see Aunt Delia will you just tell her we have drowned ourselves on account of that piece she put in the paper about us. We did not take Miss Schenk's earrings.

"'Your true friends,

"'ROSE *and* NELLIE CATRON.'"

"Oh!" gasped Belle. "Isn't that perfectly dreadful!"

"Do you really think—they have drowned themselves?" asked Bess.

Jack was reading the letter over, and the other boys were helping him decipher it. Cora waited their opinion.

"Isn't it strange," she said, as Jack laid the paper on the table, "every place we go they leave some clue, and yet they are just clever enough to escape us."

"But are they dead, do you think?" asked Belle, sobbing.

"Not much," declared Ed firmly. "They only threw that in to put Ramsy off their track. You know that account in the Chelton paper claimed that Mrs. Ramsy said she would put the girls in

the Reform School when she found them. Now what girl is going to walk into that sort of trap?"

"Wasn't it good of the poor things to wash all the dishes," remarked Bess, who was now looking at the clean porcelain on the closet shelves. "If they had only waited we might have hired them, since, for some unknown reason, Nettie has not arrived."

"And we could have helped them keep out of sight, too," added Belle, to whom any thought other than that of suicide was a welcome change. "I do wish we could find them! Don't you think we ought to search, before they get away—to the ocean?"

"Now, my dear young ladies," began Ed, assuming a comical air, "since I am to be head waiter, steward and all but butler here, I insist that the thought of foreign affairs, tinged with suicide and desperation, be tabooed from—our midst," and he actually opened the piano. "Please get your partners for——"

But the melody he struck up was not intended for a dance. It was the old, familiar: "No Place Like Home!"

In something between a wail and a howl, the three boys took up the refrain, and kept at it until the girls begged them to stop. Then Ed fell in a

heap on Walter's neck, and the two foolish young men pretended to cry, and moaned aloud without pretense.

Jack found a big dishpan and he struck up a tattoo on that with a carving knife and fork. Cora was not going to let the boys make all the noise so she procured the dinner bell and rang it violently.

When the din subsided, the boys suggested that the windows be opened, and the place aired before the arrival of the train that was to bring to Lookout Beach Mrs. Robinson and Miss Steel.

What fun it was to be in actual possession of a house!

True it was a very small house, compared with that occupied by the Robinsons in Chelton, but then there were no maids, and there was no formality. Just a perfect little cottage with everything in it for real housekeeping!

"A regular playhouse!" commented Cora. "I wish we could keep it all to ourselves without Nettie, or any other maid."

"You must come and see our house when we get set up," said Ed. "We are going to do it all alone. Take turns at cooking, and, I suppose, take turns at eating."

Bess and Belle were busy making a room ready

and comfortable for the arrival of their mother, and her guest.

"I am sure mamma will like this room best," said Bess, "for it looks out over the bay and has such a lovely tree just on the east end, where the sun might have been troublesome at daybreak."

"Yes, what a perfectly delightful room," exclaimed Cora, assisting in arranging the bed with the white coverlets, that had been placed within reach, all ready for the first comers.

"We never before had a furnished house," went on Belle, "and just see! A cake of soap and box of matches in each room! Now that is what I call *real* furniture."

And so they went on from room to room, the girls selecting and arranging according to what seemed most practical, and most pleasing. The fright of the "suicide note" was almost forgotten in the joys of exploring and experimenting.

Then the boys discovered that it was almost lunch time, and this was the signal for "a raid" on the town stores.

Ed and Jack jumped into the *Get There,* and were off before Bess or Belle had a chance to tell them what might be "nice for lunch."

"Oh, we may as well try our hand all alone this time," commented Jack, "and if we fail in buying

the right things, it will add to our general knowledge in managing 'our bungalow.' "

So they drove off, while Walter assisted in spreading rugs on the porch, and putting up hammocks.

"Wouldn't have missed this for anything," Walter declared, when Cora asked him to help put the leaves in the dining-room table. "Isn't this just playing house, though!"

"And to think that we do not have to wash any old, dusty dishes," remarked Cora. "Dear me! I wish we could get some tangible clue to the actual whereabouts of those two lone, miserable runaway girls!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE MOVING PICTURE "MOVED"

"WHERE shall we go first?" asked Bess, in a very fever of delight. "There are so many places down here. I had no idea it was such a lively place."

"I vote for moving pictures," said Cora. "I have not seen a really good motion picture show since last summer."

"But we have to get down to our bungalow," objected Jack. "When fellows rent a place they are expected to see that it doesn't burn down or—blow away."

"Oh, can't you put up some place else to-night?" asked Belle. "Mother will not let us go out alone, and we are just dying to see some of the seaside sights."

"Well, seein' as it's you," he replied, "we might arrange to sit on the beach all night. But otherwise we have got to get down to the bungalow,

and see if there is sleeping room in it, for we will not—absolutely will not—go to a hotel."

They were seated on the porch of Clover Cottage, having just had a supper which the young ladies prepared, and which every one, including Mrs. Robinson, declared was as good and tasty a supper as one could desire. True, there was some difficulty about its preparation, as there was no gas in the cottage, and the boys had considerable trouble in procuring the sort of oil that is used in the sort of stove to be found in the furnished house at the seashore. But all this, and much more, was finally accomplished, and the meal that evolved from the process did credit to the girls from Chelton.

"I'm with Cora for the motion pictures," Ed declared, as he swung himself out of the hammock, and onto his feet. "And I'm also in for a quiet little spin thereto."

"We can all pile in the *Whirlwind,*" said Jack, "and with Walter at the wheel we will all have a jolly good time and nothing to do but admire the —curve of Wallie's ears."

"Well, I guess not," objected Walter. "I went for the kerosene. It's up to somebody else to do the chores this time."

It was then decided that Ed should drive the

car, and presently the girls reappeared on the porch, each dressed in her regulation summer garb: Bess in her dainty muslin princess, Belle in her faultless linen outing suit, and Cora in her pretty blue sailor gown. The change from motor attire was welcome, and the boys did not fail to pass their compliments, and other remarks upon it. This last included the criticism that Bess might do well to add another bow behind her other ear, that Belle break off at least two yards of her single pond lily stem, and that Cora might shift her tie two or three degrees farther north; otherwise, the boys declared, the girls looked "very sweet."

"We must put the steerage chairs in the tonneau," said Cora. "Belle, we vote that you and Walter occupy these state chairs, as you will take up the least room."

"Go slow," said Jack, with better intent than grammar. "We want to see—the pretty girls."

"And we want to see—everything," added Bess. "Isn't this perfectly delightful? I am sure we will have wonderful complexions after our summer here. Why the spray fairly washes one's face."

"Nice of the spray," declared Walter, "and I fancy it will be very useful to the bunga-loafers, for we have to carry the house water from the

ocean. I can see myself washing in the atmosphere."

Along the broad, ocean driveway the lights were already blinking and sputtering in their regular nightly glow. Music could be heard from many and various attractions, and altogether the scene was as merry as the motor maids might have desired.

"Let's stop here and walk on the boardwalk," suggested Jack. "We can put the machine up at that garage."

This hint was promptly acted upon, and as soon as Ed had delivered the *Whirlwind* to the man, who would charge outrageously for housing the machine for a few hours, he joined his friends, who were all expectant for the first night's pleasure at the seaside.

Scarcely had they decided which way to go when a shout, in a familiar voice, attracted their attention.

"Hello there, Chelton!" came the call. "Where are you bound for?"

"There are Paul and Hazel!" exclaimed Cora. "Isn't that fine! Now we *will* have a party!"

And sure enough, along came Paul Hastings and his sister Hazel. Paul, handsomer than ever,

with the ocean tan just acquired in his return trip from Europe, and Hazel as bright and fetching as possible, her eyes always ready to "gleam," and her lips always ready to smile, for Hazel had the reputation of being the sort of girl who is brilliant, and knows how to "do all things well."

"This *is* luck," declared Jack. He was very fond of Hazel.

"Isn't it though!" reiterated Cora. She never tried to hide her admiration for Paul Hastings, who knew how to make his brains work for his hands.

"Where are you stopping?" asked Belle.

"We intend to stop at the Spray," said Hazel, "but the fact is, we only came down this afternoon and haven't stopped at all yet."

"And how's Old Briney?" asked Ed. "Salty as ever?"

"Just seasoned to taste," replied Paul. "I'm very fond of salt—taken externally."

"You look it," declared Walter. "I would mistake you any place for a regular tar."

With additional compliments from the girls, for indeed the sea tan was very becoming to Paul, the party started off to the theatre where the "barker" at the entrance announced the motion picture performance.

They found the place crowded, so that the party were not able to obtain seats together. Bess and Hazel went with Jack and Walter, while Paul and Ed looked after Cora and Belle.

The performance had begun. It was funny to hear a boy sing a comical song that was intended to be pathetic, and to see the illustrative pictures flashed on the big muslin. The song was all about a little girl who wanted a mamma, and who said so to a lady who knew the child's widowed father, and who finally took pity on the child and married the parent, thus affording a ready-made mamma for the little girl on the canvas. And then they were all so happy!

The intensely amateurish effect put the number beyond criticism, and the Chelton young folks applauded it vigorously. The small boy who sang was very much surprised at the applause—and so were many others in the playhouse. But the motor boys and girls kept it up, until the little fellow was compelled to come out front and bow. Then they let him go.

A wonderful story of rustic love and its "terrible" consequences was told in the regulation motion pictures, the motion of which seemed to have a very bad spell of ague. Bess was compelled to clap her hand over her eyes occasion-

ally, but the others stood the strain wonderfully, although Cora declared she hadn't a wink left for the rest of her natural life.

Another picture story was attempted when, suddenly, there was a loud hissing sound that was followed by a roar!

Instantly the place was in confusion!

Women shouted and children cried!

The lights went out, and with them seemed to go whatever amount of common sense the audience might have been expected to have held in reserve.

"Keep your seats! Keep your seats!" shouted the manager. "There is nothing at all the matter!"

The frightened and panic-stricken assemblage would not listen to the assurance, but, instead, fought their way toward the doors, until the real danger, that of being crushed to death, was evident to those who had not taken fright with the others.

"Don't move!" Jack commanded his party, in the most emphatic tone. "Keep your seats, and don't stir!"

But Belle was almost fainting with fear, and she begged to be allowed to get out.

"What for?" asked Ed. "There is absolutely

nothing the matter. The lights have gone out and the motion picture machine went up, but what harm is that? Stay where you are, Belle," and he grasped her firmly by the arm. "I wouldn't risk my—new shoes in that mob."

This quieted the girl, and she sank back against Cora, who was almost laughing at the situation.

Presently, the manager, realizing that he could not stop the crowd with his voice, called for music and ordered the other part of the performance to go on.

"Work slow!" he commanded, and then the old rusty piano "took up" something—just what it was would be hard to say.

To the alleged tune a song was started. It was perfectly dark in the place, no substitute lights having been provided, and when the voice of a young girl trembled above the din and racket of the people fighting for the open air, it seemed almost ridiculous.

"For our special benefit," announced Walter. "I don't believe there is another person seated in the place."

But the girl sang on, each bar of her song of the times bringing her voice out clearer, and fuller.

"I would like to see her face," said Cora to

Ed. "There is something familiar about that voice."

"Well, perhaps we can make a light," he replied. "I have as many as two matches, and the other fellows may have a couple."

Bess leaned over to Cora. "Doesn't that sound like Nellie?" she asked. "I am sure she had just that queer lisp."

"I was just saying the same thing," returned Cora. "Oh, if we only could find them—here, and have no further worry about them and their —foolish suicide note," for although Cora placed no credence in the drowning threat, she did not like it, and would very much preferred to have it put out of all possibility of occurring.

Still the child sang on—all about the roses and the birds that seemed to get in a most dangerous tangle, until the listeners found it difficult to tell which was sweeter—the song of the birds, or the color of the roses!

The Chelton party was not far from the place where the footlights ought to have been.

"Suppose I go over there and strike a match," suggested Ed. "I can hold it up near her face, and then you will be able to get a glimpse."

Acting on this plan he felt his way through the

dark and deserted place, and did almost reach the stage. Then he struck a match!

It went out.

He lighted another—better luck this time, for it burned away while he jumped to the stage and almost thrust the little wooden taper into the face of the singer.

The girl screamed, and seemed too frightened to move!

The match went out, and, as the place was again black in darkness, the figure on the platform passed behind the curtain and was gone!

CHAPTER XX

THE GAIETY OF GOING

"Oh, GLORIOUS gaiety!"

"Oh, delightful dissipation!"

"Oh, luscious loafing!"

"Oh, wayside wanderings!"

These remarks emanated from the exuberant spirits of Jack Kimball, Paul Hastings, Ed Foster and Walter Pennington.

It was a few evenings after the moving picture performance had ended so abruptly, and the young men insisted that this time they would "take in" some other attractions. The young ladies were almost equally enthusiastic, and therefore it was decided that the beautiful June evening be spent in the perfectly innocent sport of further sight-seeing at the select summer colony centre.

On the other evening when Ed thrust the light under the eyes of the little singer, who was following the manager's instructions to "sing for

all she was worth, to catch the crowd," and the girl had darted away, frightened at the rather daring act of attempt at recognition, Cora insisted that the singer was none other than Rose Catron.

But the darkness and confusion of the place made it impossible for even the Chelton boys to make their way back of the stage and investigate further.

Jack did try it, but the tangle of boxes and heaps of stage fixings so blocked his way that he was forced to give up before he reached what ought to be the stage entrance. Ed and Walter searched for the manager with equally unsatisfactory results, and so, for the time being, the quest had to be abandoned; although Cora was keenly disappointed in having to leave the place with no clue as to the real identity of the little singer.

That the girls had not drowned themselves was all the assurance that Belle needed to restore her peace of mind on that subject, while Bess insisted she would take the *Flyaway* and run down to the place so early next morning that if the performer should prove to be Rose, she would scarcely have had time to pick up her things in daylight, and again escape. Hazel was also in-

terested when told of the girls' strange story, and in her gentle yet decisive way, she offered to do what she could while at the beach to discover the possible whereabouts of Rose and Nellie. But the search was unavailing, as no one in authority at the moving picture theatre would answer questions satisfactorily.

"To-night," said Walter, as they started out again, "let the girls choose the attraction."

They sauntered along the brilliantly-lighted boardwalk. All the style available at the colony seemed to be on parade, and, as far as our girl friends were concerned, they would really have preferred to remain in the procession, but for the knowledge that the boys wanted to see what was going on in the big building at the end of the pier.

"The Human Washing Machine!" shouted Jack, after a glance at the sign. "Now there is a practical attraction and I am willing to pay the bill for 'doing up' every one in the crowd."

To this novelty the party betook themselves. Outside the entrance were people deliberating upon going in, but hesitating because the bill-boards announced that "each person would be put through the most novel and most complete process of washing to be obtained anywhere, at the low cost of ten cents the person."

But the Chelton folks were not afraid—they might have halted at the ironing possibility, but nothing in the way of washing had any terrors for the motor girls and their friends.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Belle. "I could never go in that!"

"Why?" demanded Walter. "It looks perfectly tempting. Smell that soap suds!" A whiff came out of the building to them.

"And look at the blueing," cried Cora, pointing to a mass of blue water flowing from a pipe outside the structure. "If we never had the 'blues' we will have them now—all ready-made."

"If never you've been blue, prepare to be blue now," quoted Ed, with semi-tragic effect.

"Come along! Come right along!" shouted the "barker," or man who was booming the attraction. "This way for the greatest sensation outside of flying! Step this way—everybody! You pays your money and you gets a good wash! Satisfaction guaranteed. The servant problem solved. Here you are, young ladies and gentlemen—right this way!" and he looked at our friends in a humorous manner.

"Hear that?" called Jack. "He has us spotted, all right. He knows we need it, maybe. I'm going in first."

"That's the way to talk," commented the barker. "You'll never regret it, my friend. Step this way to the ticket office. Remember, ladies and gentlemen," he went on, in louder tones, "this is the only human washing machine on the beach. There are washing machines run by human beings but this is absolutely and without doubt the only self-regulated, double acting, six cylinder, four speeds forward and reverse machine, that washes human beings in the short space of ten minutes—one sixth of an hour—six hundred seconds, and I say that without fear of successful contradiction. This way—everybody!"

"Here goes," went on Jack, as he purchased a number of tickets from a roll unwound by a woman in a little cage of an office. "I'll try it first, and if I survive the bleaching process the rest of you can come in."

"Oh!" cried Bess. "I'll never, never do it!"

"Me, either," added Belle.

"Wait until we see what it is," suggested Cora. "It may be great fun, and, as long as it's not vulgar I'm going in, if Jack says it's all right."

"Come one, come all!" the barker could be heard droning. The party of boys and girls went into the place, and found themselves in the midst of an excited and jolly crowd. Some had

been washed, others needed washing, some wanted washing, and others desired it, but feared to undertake the ordeal.

"Good-bye!" called Jack, gaily, as he walked along a narrow passage, protected by a railing on either side, for an attendant directed there all who wanted to indulge in the new sensation.

"Hold on!" cried Ed and Walter. "We're coming, too!"

"Get a hustle on," ordered Jack. "The water is just right now."

"The girls stood where they could watch the process. Suddenly Jack and his chums could be seen bobbing up and down, as if they were in a boat on a choppy sea, and then the girls noticed that the lads were on a sort of endless, moving sidewalk, that did all sorts of queer "stunts" while, underneath, water rushed and bubbled along, seemingly all about the boys, but never touching them.

"You are now in the tub of soapy water," announced a man who was evidently there for that purpose. "You are getting the first layer of contamination off."

Faster and faster went the moving, endless sidewalk. It surged up and down, and from side to side. The boys were laughing and joking, and

they had to cling to the railing to maintain their footing.

"This is great!" cried Jack.

"All to the la-la!" added Ed.

"It most——" began Walter, but, at that minute all three came to the end of the first scrubbing process, and were precipitated upon a highly polished slide—somewhat like the bamboo ones that are so popular at summer resorts. It was like glass, and, as there were only a few lights at this point, whereas the "tub" was brilliantly illuminated, the boys went down in a heap, and slid along.

"Part of the game," commented Jack, grimly.

"You are now on the washing board," came from the announcer. "Keep perfectly still—there is no danger."

In front of, and behind, the boys came other persons—slipping, sliding, shouting, yelling, laughing, gasping and struggling.

"Wow!" yelled Ed. "Here comes another tub to go through!"

They had reached the end of the "washboard" and once more the three boys were tossed up and down, and from side to side, while rushing water under them seemed to give the effect of being put through a boiler of suds.

"Look out! Here's something new!" yelled Ed, a moment later, and, sure enough, they emerged, after a trip up and down, and around corners, upon a scrubbing board, made of glass, under which water was rushing with such effect that it seemed as if they were going to be soaked.

"This is great!" cried Jack, as he reached it. "I thought I was in for it that time, but it's all to the soap and starch; that's what!"

His companions, and many others, followed, and, a moment later, they were facing what looked like two rolls, such as collars and cuffs are run through.

"Do we go through them?" gasped Jack, halting a moment as he got on his feet after the slide down the scrubbing board.

"Sure—go ahead," said Walter.

"Oh, mercy! He won't really go through those rolls; will he?" gasped Belle.

The rolls did look formidable, and they were whirling around at a rapid rate.

"Be a sport," called Ed. "When you've been rolled out you'll be all right, Jack."

"All right—you go ahead," retorted Jack, stepping back. "You can have my place."

"It's all right, fellows—go ahead," one of the attendants assured them. Jack faced the revolv-

ing rolls. The attendant gave him a gentle push, and, before Jack knew it he was swallowed up in the whirling cylinders.

"Oh!" screamed Bess. "He'll be killed!"

But neither she nor the others could see what happened, for Jack vanished, and, after him went Walter and Ed.

Once through the rolls, they were tossed with considerable force into a wringer ten times the size of the one through which they had just passed. Like the first the rolls were upright, and not horizontal. They seemed to be made of rubber, and were more real than the first. Jack tried to hold back, but it was of no use. He had been tossed fairly into the big wringer, and, a moment later, he found himself being drawn through. To his surprise the rolls were of straw, covered with cotton-batting, and they compressed sufficiently to allow him to go through easily.

"Come on, fellows!" Jack tried to call to his chums, but his mouth was stopped for an instant by the soft rolls. Besides, there was no need for his invitation, since Ed and Walter, whether they wanted to or not, found themselves being drawn in with irresistible force.

By this time the girls had run up, not without

some little alarm, and they saw the boys come through the rolls.

"Oh—they—they're all—all right," gasped Belle, her hand on her heart.

"Of course," cried Jack, with a laugh. "We're most done, ladies. Then it will be your turn."

"Never!" declared Cora.

"Oh, you'll like it, ladies," the attendant assured them. "Next comes the blueing water," and Jack and his friends, together with a number of other persons who were undertaking the ordeal, were once more on a moving sidewalk, sliding up and down, from side to side, and over a mass of blue, rushing water, which, seen through the sections of the walk, looked as if, every minute, it would surge up all about their feet. But they were as dry as the proverbial bone.

"Now if you will kindly step this way you will be hung out to dry," called the attendant, and a door opened, and the boys with several others were fairly shot out into a yard, where they saw what they supposed were persons hanging over clothes lines.

Jack recoiled at this.

"Go ahead. Be a sport," urged Ed.

Then Walter burst into a laugh.

"Why, they're dummies!" he gasped. "Straw figures!" And so they proved.

"All over!" announced a man. "Have another wash. It will do you good."

"Not for mine," declared Jack. "I'm clean enough to last a month."

"I'm going to have some more," announced Walter.

"So am I," declared Ed. "I'll go through with the girls this time."

"And there's Paul yet to be initiated," added Walter.

They hurried back to where they had left their friends.

"The greatest ever!" declared Jack. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything. Go ahead, girls. It's the greatest fun!"

"But those wringers?" faltered Bess. "Aren't you pressed flat?"

"Try it—and see," replied Jack, all unconscious of the joke he was perpetrating at the expense of the plump girl.

"Were they rubber?" asked Belle.

"Go through and see," was all Jack would answer.

"I'll try it," volunteered Paul.

"So will I," added Cora bravely.

"Oh, don't!" begged Belle.

"Of course I will. I'm not afraid, after Ed, Walter and Jack have been through it. Besides, look at all the other girls and ladies who venture in."

"That's the way to talk," said the attendant admiringly. "In you go, young lady," and he assisted Cora upon the narrow footpath of the first "tub." Cora went through it all, with Paul close behind her. It was all perfectly proper, and not too rough, and the girl thoroughly enjoyed it, even to the two rolling machines. She came back with her cheeks flushed from the exercise and excitement.

"Go ahead, girls!" urged Cora to her chums. "It is a most novel experience."

"I would, only for the wringers," agreed Bess.

"And I would—only—only for the slide," declared Belle, and no amount of urging could induce her or her sister to venture the novelty. But they had lots of fun watching others get "washed," and even Hazel took a trip, with Jack to keep her company, for he reconsidered his determination not to take another "dip."

Jack, his chums, the boys, and Cora and Hazel were such a merry party, and attracted so much attention that the man in charge of the machine,

after they had each enjoyed two trips through it, came up, and said:

"Say, go through again—for nothing."

"Why?" inquired Jack.

"Oh, because you're such a jolly bunch that you are drawing a big crowd in here," was the explanation. "The man outside is turning 'em away. That's good business for us. Have another dip or two for nothing. Only keep up the laughing and shouting."

"No, thank you," responded Cora, with a smile. "We are not human advertisements, if we have gone through a human washing machine," and, to the man's evident disappointment, they walked out of the place.

Bess laughed so uproariously at the sight of a stout woman essaying a trip through the machine, that the motor girl had to sit down on a box to get her breath.

"Oh, I never laughed so much in all my life," she said.

"Laugh and grow fat," commented the attendant, meaning no harm.

Bess stopped her mirth suddenly, and gave the man such a look, that, as Jack said, if glances could kill, the poor chap would have been "crippled for life."

"I wish he was!" snapped Bess, who was very sensitive about her weight. "I never heard of such a thing—just because I laughed a little."

"You should have gone through the rolls," ventured Cora. "Though they looked hard, they were as soft as a feather pillow. Come on; there's time yet."

But even the inducement of "feather pillows," would not tempt Bess or Belle to try the machine.

"Well, what next?" asked Jack, as they stood out on the big pier, and listened to the mournful swish of the incoming tide underneath. "What do you say to another moving picture show, or the band concert, or some salt-water taffy or even a lobster supper? I'm game."

"I vote for lobsters," called Ed.

"Because they're such friends of yours," retorted Walter.

"Mighty good friends, at the prices they charge down here," commented Paul. "I haven't dared look one in the face."

"Silly—a lobster hasn't a face," said his sister.

"Well, their eyes, then," amended Paul.

"I think my sister and I must really go," came from Paul. "It is getting late—for us."

"Yes, it is too late for anything more to-night," was Cora's retort. "If we don't get in on good

time, you know, boys, our liberty on other occasions may be restricted."

"Well, have your way about it," answered Jack, good-naturedly. "There are other nights coming."

"Yes, let's go home," added Belle, and Bess tried to hide a sleepy yawn, for they had traveled about considerable that day, and she was tired.

So Paul and Hazel said good-night, and the others, entering the autos, turned into the ocean boulevard and started toward Clover Cottage.

"We'll drive up, and put the machines away later," suggested Jack, when they were near their home quarters. "We really have been quite a long time away."

They found Mrs. Robinson and Miss Steel waiting on the porch.

"Why, mamma has not retired yet," exclaimed Bess. "I wonder at her sitting out of doors in the damp."

But the reason of this was soon made plain. Mrs. Robinson was too frightened to go indoors!

"Oh, we have had such a dreadful time," she sobbed. "I cannot see how you could have gone and left us in this lonely place all this while."

Bess instantly had her arms around the trembling little woman. Mrs. Robinson had always

been "babied" by the girls, and that she was very nervous her whole family knew too well.

"Mother dear," began Bess, "we did not think it too late. You said we might stay until—after nine——"

"But, daughter! How did I know we were to be frightened to death by—burglars!"

"Burglars!" chorused the boys.

"Yes," put in Miss Steel, "we distinctly heard them in the dining room, and when I had the courage to attempt to go in they—blew out the lamp!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed Belle, recoiling from the window she had been leaning against.

"It might have been—a draft of wind," suggested Walter.

"But a draft could not knock over a chair," Miss Steel told him, somewhat indignantly. "We would have gone over to the hotel if we could have left any word for you, but, you see, we could not go inside, even to write a note."

A thought flashed through Cora's mind. The mention of "note" had inspired it. She drew Bess and Belle aside.

"I wouldn't wonder if these runaway girls came back," she whispered. "We must go inside and see if they—left a note."

"Go inside!" repeated Belle. "I guess not."

"Come on, boys! Let's investigate," said Walter to the others, opening the hall door and striking a match as he did so. He lighted the hanging lamp in the little hall, while the women, with Bess and Belle, actually left the porch and went out on the sidewalk to be at a safe distance.

Cora followed the boys.

"Who's here?" asked Jack as he entered the dining room.

"Light up!" commanded Ed. "We might step on somebody's fingers."

The dining-room light was soon burning. Yes, a chair had been overturned, and another!

"The flower vase is broken!" exclaimed Cora, seeing the wreck in the centre of the table.

"And I gathered those posies!" said Ed. "Just my luck!"

"Come right along, gentlemen," invited Walter to the invisible intruders. "Come along! This way to the refrigerator!"

"Be careful, Walter," cautioned Cora, for although she had undertaken to follow the boys she had not counted on seeing things thus upset.

"There are candles in the pantry," suggested Ed. "I know, because I put them there, after I found the oil can in the cellar."

Jack and Walter each lighted a candle. They then undertook a systematic search. Closets, cupboards, corners and stairways were ransacked, every door was opened and closed, to make sure no one swung on the hinges. Then the searching party went upstairs.

The same thoroughness was observed on the second floor, but no hint of whom the intruders might be was brought to light. It took some time to go over all the smaller rooms, and, when every nook had been finally explored, Cora sat down for a moment on the hall seat.

"Listen!" she whispered.

A sound from the dining room had caught her attention.

"It's the girls," said Walter, as he, too, heard something downstairs.

"They would never come in until we assured them everything was all right," objected Cora.

"Let's go down," said Ed, at the same moment, almost falling over the bannister in his haste to get down quickly.

"There they go!" called Walter, who was just back of Jack, and, as he said this, a figure darted out the rear door, and made away, before the boys could get out of the house to follow.

"This way!" shouted Jack to Ed, as they final-

ly did reach the open yard. "I saw them go over that fence."

A light from the street at the rear of the cottage was now to be seen.

"An auto!" yelled Ed. "They are ready to start! Quick, Walter! Head them off at the corner!"

But the first buzz of the strange machine was of that determined quality that usually indicates great power, capable of spurting some rods away with one great, grand whizz! The car was out of sight, and out of sound, while Walter was struggling with the stickers of a barbed wire fence. A dark stretch of road, that at once united and separated two summer resorts, made the flight of the intruders' car too simple to speculate upon.

"If our garage was not so far away," complained Walter, returning from the fence with bleeding fingers, "we'd have a race."

"Hanged funny, isn't it?" commented Ed.

"As if that—person—we saw get away was a robber! Why, that was a girl—she crawled under the fence!" declared Walter.

"She may have left me a bunch of violets," remarked Jack with a sigh, as they all three went back to the cottage, where, at the steps, Cora was waiting. "Say, sis," her brother went on, "let's

go in and look over things now. I have an idea that our visitor came to wash up more dishes!"

"And I also have an idea that the visitor—had been here before," replied Cora. "They—he—she, or it—knew how to open that funny catch on the screen door!"

Re-entering the house the boys made all sorts of fun of each other, for each and all of them allowing the "burglar" to escape.

"But, joking aside," said Cora, "I know I heard the noise in the dining room, and I'm going to look there first."

"For my violets," whimpered Jack, with a sniffle.

"June violets!" mocked Cora.

"Well—daisies then. I saw daisies as we came out, and I'd just as soon have daisies."

Ed and Jack held their candles high above their heads as they tiptoed into the dining room.

A bit of paper fluttered from the hanging lamp!

"More directions on 'How to Use This Cottage!'" roared Jack. "There, didn't I tell you! This is the second note left this way. Must have come by a homing-pigeon. Well, I'd just as soon have a dove as a bouquet of violets."

CHAPTER XXI

BOYS AND GIRLS

A HALF hour later the entire party at Clover Cottage sat in the cozy dining room, engaged in earnest consultation.

The frightened Mrs. Robinson, and the timid Miss Steel, had finally consented to come indoors, after the situation had been described, punctuated and emphasized to them, although they really did want to put up at the hotel in the Circle.

The subject under discussion was the note that was found dangling from the hanging lamp. It was from Nellie Catron, and was not addressed to any one in particular.

Cora had read it, and was now re-reading it.

"If you don't stop hounding us," she read, "we will surely drown ourselves. We could get along if you would leave us alone, but we think that balky-horse-trick played on us the other night is about the limit."

Cora stopped. "Now," she said, "it is per-

fectly plain that a girl never wrote that note. In the first place, it is not a girl's writing, and in the next, no girl would speak that way about putting a match under her nose!"

In spite of the seriousness of the matter every one was forced to laugh at the remark. Certainly it did seem like the old-fashioned trick used to start a balky horse—light a match under his nose.

"Then who do you suppose did write it, if not one of the girls?" asked Bess.

"Why, perhaps the driver of the automobile," replied Cora.

"I would not bother myself about those two foolish girls, longer," said Mrs. Robinson. She was quite exhausted from the evening's experience, and anxious to have her cottage put in its normal condition.

"Mother, dear," interceded Belle, "you are nervous and worried. Just let me take you upstairs, and the others can settle it all to suit themselves."

This offer was promptly accepted, and presently the young folks were left to decide whether or not they would further endeavor to find the runaways.

"It seems to me," said Cora, "that they need our help now, more than ever. They may have

gotten in with some unscrupulous persons—and who can tell what may happen?"

"Certainly working girls do not drive autos," put in Ed, "and I just suspicion that the manager of that show wants to keep the girls for the song business. They can sing a little, and talent is scarce just now. That is, if they really were in the show."

"Right!" exclaimed Walter. "He would have to look around considerable to get girls to sing now, for all the schools are not closed, and the season of fun has not really begun yet. Later, I suppose there will be a regular drift this way."

"That is why father thought we ought to come down early," put in Bess. "He thinks it is so much pleasanter at the seaside late and early, rather than in the regular season."

"Of course," said Cora, "the girls are afraid of that robbery business; otherwise they would not try to keep away from us, for I am quite sure they know we would not turn them over to that aunt."

"I wonder how they are making out on that robbery?" asked Walter. "Wasn't there something doing the day we left Chelton?"

"Something, and then some more," replied Jack, with a sly wink. "I expect a report from 'headquarters' on it very soon."

"And poor little Andy! I do wonder what became of him?" added Cora.

"Ice cream became of him the last I saw him," retorted Jack, "and I must say the brown part of the cone was really very becoming to him, for it matched his complexion."

"Then," went on Ed, "we will start on a regular search to-morrow. No use letting them slip away, when you girls feel that it is really up to you to find them. We will put up at the hotel to-night, and early to-morrow start in bunga-loafing. Then, when we get things to rights—we will be pleased —ahem—to—ahem—meet you at the pergola, ladies!"

"No, at the pavilion," replied Bess. "I am just dying to see all the sights there. And then we will be directly in the centre of everything to start out from there."

This obtuse remark gave the boys no end of fun. It was so like Bess—a regular "Bessie," they declared, and, to discover its meaning Jack, Ed and Walter put their heads together literally, although Jack accused Ed of doing all the knocking, and he had to withdraw from the conference because of a rather too vigorous bump.

Bess was so vexed that she ran upstairs, and

left Cora alone to lock the door after the young fellows.

"You really must go, boys," Cora insisted. "Mrs. Robinson is going to keep model hours, and I am only a guest here."

This was taken as the ultimatum, and reluctantly the trio left with the promise of a "big day" on the morrow.

Cora and Bess chatted a while before retiring. They had many things to talk of, but the lateness of the hour prevented a lengthy discourse.

"Mother is so worried because our maid Nettie does not come," Bess whispered. "She is always so reliable, and so prompt, we cannot imagine what can have detained her."

"She may be ill," suggested Cora.

"Father would send a message in that case," replied Bess.

"Perhaps you will get a message on the morning mail," continued Cora. "At any rate, I would not worry about matters at home."

With this hopeful assurance the girls said goodnight, and soon closed their eyes on that day's experience at Lookout Beach.

The "morning dawned auspiciously," as Belle would say, but according to the boys it was a "peach of a day." Either way the morning was

delightful, clear ocean air seeming to provide both eating and drinking to those who breathed deep of its salt tanginess and ozone.

And this was the day that our boy friends were to go housekeeping!

Before any of the other patrons of the hotel were stirring Ed, Jack, and Walter were roaming about the verandas, waiting for an early breakfast. Nor did they depend upon waiting, alone, for they spoke pleasantly to the dining-room maids, who were arranging linen and flowers, and in response to entreaties the boys did get an early meal, and of the very best there was in the hotel.

The melons were exactly cold enough, the omelette was done to a turn, and had the turn, the coffee was fragrant and strong, and the hot buns "talked," Walter declared.

Of course, in recognition of this special favor, the boys left some tokens, in coin, at their plates, but their politeness and pleasantries were even more appreciated by the young women, who must take frowns and smiles day after day, and who must ever reply to these variable conditions, with smiles and good nature.

"And now for the bungalow!" called out Ed, as the three strolled off toward the irresistible beach. "Gosh! but it was a lucky thing that we trailed

after the girls. Here we are, taking a vacation that can't be beat, and yet we just flopped right, plumb into it."

"You may have flopped," remarked Walter, "but it strikes me that some of us have worked for this. I hired the bungalow."

"And we paid the rent!" from Jack.

"And us—us are going housekeeping!" added Walter.

Each of the young men contributed his share to these expletive exclamations.

They were running along in the sand, stopping occasionally to write their names, or leave an address for some mermaid.

"Wah-hoo! Wah-hoo!"

The call came from the rocks at the end of the water tongue. Presently three sprites appeared. They might have been humans, but to the boys they looked like nothing more or less than water sprites. All three happened to be gowned in white, Bess, Cora and Belle, and as they gamboled over the rocks, making their way to the water's edge, the boys were compelled to draw in long breaths of admiration.

"'Low there!" greeted Ed. "Wait till I become Ulysses. Hey there! Circe! Not so fast else thy feet will have to follow thy heads!"

"Ulysses!" mocked Walter. "More like Jupiter! Just watch him make the water roll off of his head. He is going to dive!"

Scarcely had Walter uttered the words than Ed plunged over the end of the water tongue, and could not stop until he had actually splashed into the shallow water. The tongue ran to a fine point, and the point was not discernible from the viewpoint available to Ed.

"Whew!" he spluttered. "Circe had me that time! Now, what do you think of that for a new pair of shoes!"

By this time the girls had reached the water's edge.

"Better stick to plain Chelton and the motor girls," said Cora with a hearty laugh, in which the other girls joined. "You will find that the myths are dangerous brands of canned goods—won't keep a minute after they are opened up for review!"

Ed was running the water out of his shoes. They were thoroughly soaked, and the salt effect was too well known to be speculated upon. Jack stood on his head in the deep sand—he was exulting over Ed's "downfall."

"Wait! Wait!" prophesied the unfortunate one. "You are not back home yet."

"Oh, there's the bungalow!" suddenly called out Bess, who was some paces in advance. "How I wish we girls could camp!"

"Aren't you?" asked Walter. "What do you call that place where the notes grow on the gas jets?"

"Why, that's a regular up-to-date cottage, including——"

"Mother and chaperone," added Belle. "I cannot see why the most needful adjunct does not arrive in the person of Nettie, our star maid. I had to dry dishes this morning," and she looked gloomily at her white hands.

"That's what is called camping," advised Jack. "I am going to do the supper dishes, Ed will do the dinner dishes, his hands are nice and soft for grease, and Walter will 'tend to the tea—things. Don't forget, Wallie, the tea things for yours!"

"It usually rains at night," Walter remarked. "I don't mind putting the things in a dishpan outside."

"And have them dried in the sunny dew! Oh, back to nature! You wonderful back-to-nature faker!" cried Ed.

"Nature must have an awful 'back-ache,'" finished Jack. "I would hate to have her job these days."

"Here we are!" announced Ed, as they reached the cabin on the beach. "Isn't this the real thing?"

"Oh, what a fine bungalow!" exclaimed Cora.

"Isn't it splendid!" added Belle.

"My, but it is——"

"Sweet and low!" Jack interrupted Bess. "I like that tune for a bungalow!"

They were following Jack, who had the big, old-fashioned key, for the lock had been constructed to add to the novelty of the hut.

It took some time to open the low door, but it did finally yield to the pressure of the three strong young men.

"Enter!" called Jack, bowing low to the girls, "Pray enter, pretty maidens. Are there any more at home like you?"

"There are a few, and pretty, too," responded Cora, taking up the strain of the familiar song.

Then such antics! And such discoveries! What is more resourceful than a strange house filled with strange things, strange corners and strange —spider webs!

"Don't open the trunk!" shrieked Belle. "There may be a——"

"Note in it!" finished Walter. "Now, nixy

on notes. I want the goods or nothing, in our house."

Boxes were being pulled from their salty corners, hammocks were dragged out, lanterns were being "swung," and altogether it seemed merely a question of who could upset the place most thoroughly.

"Halt! Avaunt! Ship ahoy!" yelled Jack. "If you breaks the stuff you pays fer it. This stock is inventoried."

But the girls ran from one thing to another, regardless of dust or dampness.

"Oh, just look at the funny kettle!" exclaimed Belle. "I'm sure that is for an outdoor fire."

"Certainly it is," replied Ed, just as if he knew what he was talking about. "That also has to rest on Nature's back."

Something rumbled close to the cottage, then a shriek from outside startled them.

"What's that!" cried Cora.

Ed pushed open the door.

"An auto in the ocean!" he yelled, dashing out of the bungalow, while the others followed as quickly as they could make after him.

Ed threw off his coat as he ran. A few paces down the beach, in the very face of the rollers, was a small runabout, the terrified occupants of

which were vainly struggling to get out, into a dangerous depth of water.

"Quick, boys!" shouted Ed. "The engine is still running! Maybe we can back it up!"

CHAPTER XXII

A STRUGGLE WITH THE WAVES

WHEN Ed, Jack and Walter ran down the sandy beach, directly into the water, and then attempted to rescue from the waves a lady and her daughter, who were in the ocean-going auto, the giris were not afraid to follow them—to the extent of walking into the water knee deep.

The helpless woman was a cripple, and when she, with an exhausting effort, managed to turn to one side and fall over the rim of the runabout seat into the water, she dropped like a stone into the surf. The daughter jumped, but in her frantic efforts to reach her mother, she crawled under the car, and was in very great danger of being lost herself.

Suddenly the helpless form of the crippled woman rose to the surface.

Jack threw his arms about the invalid, and, after shouting for Walter to help him, as the force

of the rollers threatened to take him off his feet, the two young men managed to make their way safely to the sand with the unconscious form.

Meanwhile the anxious motor girls hastened to offer what assistance they might be able to give.

"Lay her down here," said Cora, as her brother escaped from the fury of one great, dashing mountain of water, that broke into foam as it spread out over the sand.

"I think we will have to take her into the bungalow," he replied. "But where is Ed? Look for Ed! He has not found the girl yet!"

And indeed neither Ed nor the girl could be seen!

Cora and Bess left Belle with Jack and Walter to attend to the woman, while they again stepped forward as far into the water as it seemed safe to go.

"There is Ed!" shouted Cora, and without doing more than unclasping the leather belt that confined her waist, she struck out boldly toward a point considerably farther out than the spot where the stalled car stood in the water.

"Oh, you can't swim—that way, Cora!" called Bess. "Cora! Cora! come back!"

But with arms over her head Cora plowed her

way through the waves, stroke after stroke, until she was beside Ed, who was struggling to beat back the rollers that fought for the very life of the girl he had just brought up from under the heavy blanket of smothering water.

"Mother! Mother!" wailed the girl. "Let me get—mother. She is—down—down there!"

"No—she is—safe!" gasped Cora. "Come! Let us help you—out!"

"Oh is—she safe! I—I am all right! I—can swim!"

"But you are too weak!" called Ed. "Let us help you!"

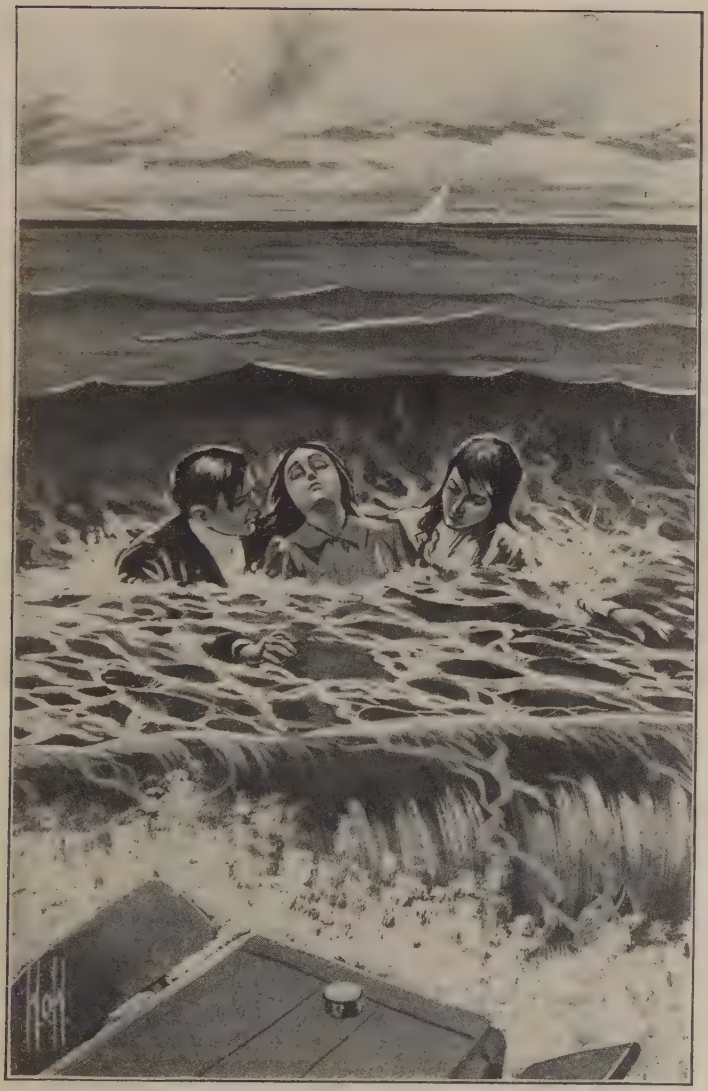
A shriek—and the girl again disappeared.

Ed went down after her, and while Cora kept in motion to sustain herself, Ed came up with the girl again in his arms.

"Take hold!" he gasped to Cora. "She is hurt and cannot swim."

Cora, with one well trained arm, conquered the waves, while with the other she helped support the form of the almost fainting girl, as Ed, swimming in the same way, and almost carrying the girl with his free arm, made for the shore.

Forgetting everything but the danger to her friends, Bess, too, ran into the waves to meet the swimmers.



THEY HELPED SUPPORT THE FORM OF THE ALMOST FAINTING GIRL

"Go back!" shouted Ed. "If you lose your footing we can't help you."

Scarcely had he uttered the words than Bess stumbled and fell, head foremost, into the roller that was rushing up on the shore!

Fortunately the incoming water brought Bess in—fairly tumbling her out on the sand. The same power assisted Ed and Cora to land with the strange young girl. Meanwhile Jack and Walter had made their way to the bungalow, assisting the crippled woman.

"Oh!" shrieked Bess, scrambling to her feet. "Oh, I—am smothered!"

"So are we!" Cora managed to say. "Come, Bess. Help us revive the young lady."

"Oh I—am—all—right now——" murmured the girl. "Only let me—get to mother!"

A sorry looking sight indeed were the motor girls—all four of them, for the strange girl should be classed with Bess, Belle and Cora, as she, too, owned a car and drove it. True she did allow it to get beyond control, and, by a sudden wrong turn of the wheel, sent it in the ocean. Still she was a motor girl for all her inexperience.

"Where are you hurt?" asked Ed, as they all stood for a moment on the beach. The strange

girl was working her shoulder with evident painful effort.

"I must have injured my neck or shoulder blade when I dove under the machine," she replied. "Something—is very stiff."

"Let us get up to the bungalow," suggested Cora, for the strange girl seemed like one dazed. "Your mother is there, and I hope by this time she has revived."

Even in their discomfiture our friends could not help noticing what a pretty and pleasant mannered girl the stranger was. Every little nicety of good breeding was perfectly evident in her gentle gratitude to her rescuers, and in her earnest solicitation for her mother.

Ed led the way to the camp, while the girls followed. Belle met them at the door.

"How is she?" asked Cora, knowing how anxious was the girl about her invalid mother.

"She is quite revived," replied Belle, "but she wants her daughter. I am so glad you have come," hurried on Belle, without waiting for any formality. "She seems greatly worried about—Beatrice."

"Oh, let me see her," exclaimed the girl. "Dear, little, darling mamma," and before the others could show the way Beatrice (for such was her

name) had the crippled form clasped lovingly in her arms.

What a strange sight in the musty little bungalow! Belle was the only person who was not dripping wet—and the girls were so far from Clover Cottage, and from an auto to take them there, that there was a prospect they might dry out before fresh garments could be secured.

Beatrice looked up from the face of the trembling woman. "I wonder if we can—use the car?" she ventured. "I must get mother back to the hotel."

"If we can get the machine out and the magneto is not short circuited from the water," said Jack, "I don't see why you couldn't run it."

"There are the life guards," exclaimed Cora, who stood by the open door. "And they have a coil of rope."

"Good!" declared Jack. "We will have something to pull with, and some one to help us now. Come along, boys. Girls, you will find a basket of provisions some place. There may be, in it, something of use," and with this he ran out to the beach where like two bronzed figures the life guards stood regarding the auto in the ocean. It did not take the boys long to explain the situation, and to show what needed to be done to

haul out the ocean-going car. Fastening the heavy ropes about the machine the three boys and the two men pulled—pulled—and pulled!

At first the car would not budge. Then the soft sand, in which the tires were buried, slid away some, under the urgent pressure, and finally, when the car once moved, all hands at the ropes gave a concerted pull, and the machine rolled slowly, but more and more surely, toward the edge of the shelving beach.

"Good!" exclaimed Ed. "Don't stop! Keep it up!"

It was heavy work, but at last the auto was clear of the water.

"There!" gasped Jack, almost breathless. "That's all to the gasolene! Now to look her over."

Half an hour of steady work and then Ed grasped the handle and started to crank up. It was stiff at first but presently the familiar whir-r-r-r—of the motor sounded, and Walter from the seat threw in the clutch with the lever set at low speed. The magneto was all right.

The little car swung out as gracefully as if it had "never tasted salt water," as Jack put it.

The girls were eagerly watching every move.

How thankful they were, for the woman in

the bungalow had need of immediate medical attention.

In less time than it would seem possible to accomplish so much, Jack and Ed lifted the light form of the sick woman into the car, and, while Beatrice supported her mother on the right, Jack took his place at the wheel, and started off toward the hotel.

"We will send the auto back for you young ladies," called Beatrice. "It won't take any time to get to the hotel."

The car, once out of sight, Walter and Ed rushed into the bungalow, smashed a couple of dry boxes, and thrust them into the little stone fireplace, put a match to a bundle of paper, and then all four, who had assisted in the rescue, stood before the blaze, while steam sizzled up from the water that fell in puddles on the floor from the soaked garments.

"We *did* get it," remarked Ed. "I never swam before—this way."

"Is there anything wetter than wet clothes?" asked Cora.

"Oh, yes," replied Bess. "I think the wettest thing I have ever found is the—bottom of the sea! Mercy, but I did think I was gone!"

"You were," replied Walter, swishing a few

drops of the too plentiful water in her eyes. "You were gone, but not forgotten, and you came back like—the famous penny!"

"Oh, you can joke!" retorted Bess. "But I tell you I was almost washed out."

"Worse than the laundry," teased Ed. "Well, Bess, you look a lot better. I do believe you've gotten thin!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE EXCURSION

When Jack returned to the bungalow, with the rescued runabout, he was all excitement over the discovery of pretty Beatrice Blakley. He even went so far as to declare that she had confided in him the fact that she was just about to get an electric runabout, that her father was a very wealthy man, and that she was going to be at Lookout Beach all summer!

This information was detailed in such a way as to excite the possibility of jealousy in the other motor girls, particularly in Bess, who really looked upon Jack Kimball as quite a friend—one whom she could depend upon to look out for her particular pleasure, and give her all the little attentions that go to make up the sum total of a good time for the summer girl.

So the arrival upon the scene of Miss Beatrice was rather a surprise—to say the least.

"Come on, Cora," called Jack, after he had

given a particularly enthusiastic description of Beatrice's wonderful management of her sick mother, "I promised you would go to the hotel this afternoon to see how Mrs. Blakley is, and to find out if they need anything before Mr. Blakley gets down from town."

"Of course I'll go," replied Cora, with a sly smile. "Belle and I, or Bess and I will call, certainly."

"Well, get in the machine, you three, and we boys will get ourselves dried out. You may keep the runabout at the Clover until you are ready to go over in the afternoon. Then I'll drive you."

This assertion caused every one to laugh at Jack. The idea of his driving two motor girls! As if they couldn't manage a little car like that!

"Well, we will see," said Cora, as she, Bess, and Belle climbed into the car, which held three comfortably. "Perhaps if you are very good we may take you along. Or you may——"

"I say, fellows!" interrupted Ed. "I thought we were going to see that excursion come in from Chelton this afternoon. Some of our boys are coming down."

"Of course," added Walter. "Jack, you don't call on B—— this afternoon. Make it some other

time. We are going down to the pier to see the folks from home, and in the meantime, we've got a lot to do to get this camp pitched. And you are cook for the first week. Don't forget that."

"Oh, all right," assented Jack. "Of course, if you *all* insist. Perhaps I can live!" and he sighed dramatically.

Two hours later the motor girls and the boys, all refreshed in correct summer garb, without any evidence of their morning's experience, waited on the pier, while the big excursion boat *Columbia* sailed in, her colors flying gaily, and the hands and hats of seemingly every youth in Chelton, waving over the deck rails, as the annual summer outing of Lincoln County put in to port at Lookout Beach.

Hazel and Paul were with the Kimballs and Robinsons, so that all our friends from Chelton united in welcoming the excursionists.

"There's Fred!" called Jack, the first to discover a familiar face in the big crowd.

"And there's Ben," added Ed. "As if Fred Bennet could travel without Ben Fredericks."

"Clear the way there, please," ordered the boatman. "We must have room for the gangplank —that's a big crowd."

The girls left the inside aisle, and slipped under

the rail to the outer walk of the pier, but the boys held to their place. They insisted upon seeing the people land, and it was no little fun to be real sojourners at the popular watering place, when so many other boys and girls have to be content to visit the beach for a single day.

"Oh, there's little Nannette," called Cora. "Jack! Jack!" she shouted, "bring Nannette over here. See! she is walking with that old man!"

Jack ducked in and out of the crowd until he reached the girl called Nannette. She was a very small creature, a cripple, and when seen by Cora, the latter immediately essayed to look after the delicate child, so that she might not suffer unnecessarily in the rush and crush of the crowd.

And Nannette was indeed glad to see Jack Kimball. The young man almost carried her to Cora, for Nannette was a general favorite in the village—one of those human buds that never blossom, but always stay in the childhood of promise—unconscious of time and unmindful of method.

"Oh, we are so glad you came down," exclaimed Cora, embracing the child. "You will have a lovely day. Are you tired? Did you enjoy the sail?"

But before she could answer the other girls

plied similar questions, until the little one was fairly besieged with kind attention.

"Hello there!" shouted some one. "Where are the boys?"

"Brownson McLarin!" exclaimed Bess, with a slight blush. "I wonder——"

"If Teddy is with him," finished Belle, with a meaning nod to Cora. "Now, if Teddy is here, we may all depend upon Bess for a good time. Teddy would rather spend money on Bess than eat a shore dinner."

"Land o' Goshen!" shouted Jack. "Look—at —Andy!"

The girls turned to see what he indicated. And sure enough, there was little Andy from Squaton, but so dressed up and displaying such a physical "shine," that his friends from Chelton would scarcely have recognized him had not Jack pointed him out.

"Fetch him over here," begged Cora.

"Say, Cora," replied Jack, "would you like me to pull in the whole crowd, and let you take your pick? Seems to me you want every one you see," but at the same time he "reached" little Andy, and led him over to the rail, behind which the motor girls were sequestered.

Andy was delighted to see Cora. He was

brimming over with news—but it did not take him long to whisper that he had something "special" to tell her, as soon as she could give him a few minutes all alone.

"What's it about?" asked Cora eagerly.

"About the 'sparklers,' " replied the lad. "We got them, and me mother got the hundred!"

"The diamond earrings have been found!" exclaimed Cora, startled at such a surprising piece of news.

"Yep, they're found, all right," replied Andy. "What do you think of me suit? And I've got more home. We got the reward."

"Who got it," demanded Cora.

"Me—I—we," stammered Andy, somewhat confused in his grammar.

"Where did you find them?" persisted Cora.

"Hey, there, Andy!" yelled a boy in a very shabby outfit. "Where's all that 'dough' you was telling us about? Come on. It's up to you," and, before Cora could get an answer from the little redheaded boy, he was gone.

As he sauntered off, with his companions, Cora saw that he was counting money—considerable money, too, it seemed to her.

Bess and Belle were busy talking to Nannette.

They had not noticed Andy. The excursionists were now almost all landed.

The news so suddenly divulged by Andy confused Cora.

What did he mean by getting the reward? Of course the diamond earrings must have been found —he said that distinctly enough, but had they been hidden by the orphan girls, as was the case which contained the gems?

"Cora," called Belle, "Nannette is hungry. Come up to the candy kitchen, and we will show her how they make salt water taffy."

"All right," replied Cora. "Of course you must be hungry, Nannette, you had to leave home so early."

It was difficult to make their way through the steady stream of people that poured up the long pier. Cora walked ahead, while Bell and Bess, on either side, protected the deformed child.

"Oh, I can smell the taffy!" exclaimed the girl, as they neared the candy kitchen.

"Yes, so can I," agreed Cora. "It would almost make one hungry."

They were now in front of the store with the big glass windows. Through this glass could be seen the workers in the exhibition kitchen. There

were a few girls in white aprons, and high white caps, doing up pieces of "taffy" in papers, and working beside them were two men, also clad in white linen. The men were popping corn over a gas stove.

"Look," said Belle. "That is how they make it. Stand here a moment and watch."

The girls drew up in front of the window. As they stopped two men from the excursion boat also paused to observe the candy makers.

Cora turned and looked at the men. A remark one made about "runaways" had attracted her attention.

"Oh!" she suddenly gasped. Then she clutched Belle's arm.

"Come on," she whispered. "I don't care to stand here."

"What's the matter?" asked Bess, noting the change in Cora's face.

"Those are—the detectives," she whispered. "I don't want to get in conversation with them. Come on."

But both men were looking directly at Cora. She felt it was too late for her to try to escape their scrutiny.

"Look! Look!" exclaimed Bess. "There are——"

But at that instant two girls behind the glass window in the candy kitchen came forward with their trays of freshly-made candy. Both girls looked through the window—directly at Cora and at the others with her.

"Nellie and Rose!" exclaimed Belle.

"Oh!" gasped Cora, "if I only could tell them the diamonds are found!"

For a single instant the two girls in the caps and aprons stood like statues. Then they evidently saw the two men who stood directly back of Cora.

With a scream that penetrated the distance and the glass windows, the two unfortunate girls dropped their trays on the counter, and dashed out of the store into the kitchen, showing fright and terror as they ran.

"They saw the detectives," declared Cora. "Oh, I must reach them! But in this crowd!"

Some one tapped Cora on the shoulder.

It was one of the Squaton detectives.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TWO ORPHANS

"Oh, Rose! I can't go another step! Let them catch us if they want to. I think I—a—am going to—die!"

"Nellie dear, try to keep up. We will be at the station soon. And you know those were detectives from home! Oh, try to keep on!"

"I—can't! I've got to stop!"

The girl sank in the sand like the poor, tired, frightened little thing that she was. Rose put her arms round her sister, and her tears fell on the sunburned cheek that lay so helpless there, supported only by an arm equally sunburned, and equally exhausted.

"Oh, we will surely be caught," moaned Rose. "Don't you think, when you rest awhile, you can go on, Nellie, dear? You were always so brave, and so strong."

"We have got to stop some time, Rose. Why should we go on like this? I am almost dead for

sleep, and I feel as if I could go to sleep right here."

Rose kissed the sad little face, and brushed back the rudely cropped hair, that lay in ringlets on Nellie's head. "It has been awfully hard, little sister," she said; "perhaps we had better give up and go back!"

The words seemed to startle the child, who lay on the sand. Instantly she sat bolt upright.

"Go back!" she repeated. "To that place! We might better die here!"

"Then why should we not see the detectives, and tell them all about it? Surely Aunt Delia will not be allowed——"

"But she has been allowed," insisted Nellie. "Hasn't she treated us badly for years? And who was there to stop her? Who is there to stop her now?"

"Perhaps those young ladies could help us," sobbed Rose. "We may have done wrong to run away from them."

"I did like that dark girl," assented Nellie, rubbing her aching eyes, "and she did say she would see us again."

The two sisters were on an isolated patch of the beach and had been trying to make their way to the railroad station. In taking this sandy walk

they had avoided the regular traffic path, but the heavy traveling had been too much for the younger one, who was plainly beginning to feel, and show, the signs of her perilous adventure since the day when she ran away from the strawberry patch of Squaton. It was late in the afternoon, almost dusk, but the happy shouts of the excursionists could be heard for a mile along the beach. Here and there groups of boys who had left the crowds were to be seen digging holes in the sand, and capering about with all their energy, to have their very best fun in that one last hour allowed before the big boat would sail away, and carry them off home again.

"There come some boys," said Rose. "Try to stand up, they will be sure to stop and gawk at us."

Nellie sat up, but made no effort to stand. Presently the three boys came romping along.

As Rose had guessed, they did stop and look at the girls; stared at them not rudely but in wonderment, for Nellie and Rose were too far away from merrymakers to be mistaken for members of the excursion party.

"Oh!" exclaimed Nellie, catching sight of one of the boys.

"Well, I never!" gasped the boy at the same moment. "If there ain't Nellie and Rose!"

"Oh, Andy!" cried Nellie, "do come and talk to us. We are not afraid to trust you. Don't say who we are—don't mention our names!"

The little fellow did not need to be cautioned. Neither did he wait for the invitation to talk to the lonely girls.

"Wherever have you been?" he asked. "Have you heard the news?"

"We haven't heard any *good* news," replied Rose sadly.

"Then I've got some fer you," said the lad, shaking his manly little head. "The diamonds is found and I got the boodle!"

"Oh!" gasped Nellie. "Found! Then we—won't have to hide any more. Where did you find them?"

The whistle of the excursion boat checked the boy's eager talk.

"Come on!" shouted the other lads to Andy. "If you don't hustle, you'll get left!"

"Well, then I *will* get left," declared Andy. "I'm going to stay right here with these girls—they're friends of mine."

"Oh, no, Andy, don't," begged Rose. "Run along and catch the boat. We wouldn't know

what to do with you, if you got left. Besides your mother would be scared to death. She would think you were drowned."

Andy hesitated.

"Do go," put in Nellie, jumping up and throwing her arms about the boy. "I could just hug you to death, you have made us so happy. And you—look—just fine!"

"Run!" shouted the boys, as the whistle blew. "That's the last call!"

"Run!" called Rose.

"Yes, do run!" pleaded Nellie.

Turning to give the girls a look so full of meaning that even Andy's bright eyes seemed overtaxed with the responsibility, the boy did run as fast as his legs could carry him.

"I'm afraid they will miss it," murmured Rose, as the two sisters, now so changed in expression, watched the boys make their way through the sand.

"Oh, Rose! Aren't you happy!" exclaimed Nellie. "Now we can do as we please."

"But Aunt Delia might send us to the reform school for running away," mused the older girl.

"Oh, I can't think she would do that!"

"But think of all she has done! I am afraid to trust her."

The tooting of the excursion boat could be heard as the vessel steamed out. Wistfully the girls looked over the broad expanse of water, out to the track made by the smoke from the *Columbia*.

"We might have gone back home," sighed Nellie.

"I would rather stay here—I feel we have some friends. Those girls——"

"But why did they chase us about so?"

"They wanted to find us—perhaps. That was nothing against them."

"Do you think the man in the candy kitchen would take us back? The detectives must have gone back on the boat, and we needn't be afraid now."

"Why, Nellie dear, perhaps the detectives are up at that store watching for us. We can't go there unless we want to——"

"Where can we go?" cried the child. "Oh, dear me! What a dreadful thing it is—to be orphans!" and she began to cry.

"There's no use crying," said Rose, although her own eyes were brimful. "We have got to go somewhere for the night."

"Let's go to the cottage—to the automobile girls' cottage."

"I am able to work, and I want to work," insisted Rose stoutly. "They need girls at every hotel, that young lady in the kitchen told me."

"But I am so tired—so hungry—and so—sleepy! Rose, let us sleep right here. We are not afraid of anything now."

"Who are those people coming?" asked Rose as a number of figures could be seen, outlined against the strip of sky that hung over the point of land.

"There's quite a crowd," said Nellie. "I guess we will have to walk along."

But running ahead of the others came a boy. He was waving his cap and shouting something!

"It's Andy!" murmured Rose. "Oh, he got left!"

"And—look there!" cried Nellie. "Those are the detectives after us! We must run! Maybe they don't know the diamonds are found and will arrest us. I should die of shame then. We must run!"

"We can't," replied Rose miserably. "Oh, yes, Nellie. They have us this time," and sinking down in the sand she clasped her hands and looked up. "Let us ask—mother in heaven—to take care of us!" she said reverently. Then they waited until the detectives came along.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TRUTH! THE WHOLE TRUTH!

"Rose! Nellie!" shouted Andy. "Get up! What's the matter?"

The girls raised their eyes and saw before them not only the detectives but Jack and Cora Kimball, also Ed Foster.

"Come, girls," began the taller of the two officers from Squaton. "You seem to be having a pretty hard time of it. What are you crying for?"

"Oh, we didn't take the earrings!" sobbed Nellie. "And we don't want—to go—to the reform school!"

"Who said you did take them?" inquired the officer, as Cora put her arm about Nellie, and assisted her to rise. "And who said you were to go to the reform school?"

"That piece in the paper," replied Rose. "It said we would be sent there until——"

"Oh, that was some of the old lady's work.

Don't you worry about that. Just come along with us. Don't you be afraid that any one is going to hurt you," for he saw distrust in Rose's face. "You are among friends—all friends!"

"You bet!" cried Andy. "I got left from the boat just in time to tell them where you were."

"Come along," said Jack kindly. "You both look ready to—collapse."

"I was just going to," declared Nellie, rubbing her hand over her inflamed eyes. "I was going to jump into the water before Rose could stop me, but when she called our mother to help us I—couldn't—then."

"Nellie!" exclaimed Rose in surprise.

"Now do come along," begged Cora. "You must need food and rest. I am almost dead myself from running around——"

"After us?" asked Nellie innocently.

The officer and young men smiled.

"Well, you see," began Jack, "we just caught Andy 'getting left,' as he put it, and he told us where you were——"

"But Andy's mother will be scared to death," insisted Nellie, brightening up.

"Oh, we have attended to that," said Jack. "We sent her a message. Andy is going to visit us 'bungaloafers' for a few days. We just need

a boy like Andy to help us get in shape," and Jack patted the smiling boy kindly.

"Our cars are out on the road," said Cora, "and we are all to go to the cottage. So, come on, girls. We are just dying to tell your odd story to several people. Your friends in the candy kitchen have been dreadfully worried since you left them so suddenly."

"They thought you jumped in the ocean," blurted out Andy, who had no regard for propriety in making such remarks.

The orphans acted almost frightened—it seemed too strange to be true, that they were going to get in an automobile, and be allowed to go to a house without being hunted and chased—without hiding or sneaking!

"Here we are," announced Ed, who cranked up one car into which Andy "piled" without any ceremony whatever.

Jack started up the *Whirlwind,* and into the big car Nellie and Rose were assisted. Cora sat beside Jack, and the detective insisted upon walking as he had "to meet a man" on the road and had scarcely time to keep this appointment.

Nellie was completely dazed. She sat bolt upright, as if afraid to lean against the soft cushions of the car.

Rose was more composed, but she also appeared ill at ease in the luxurious surroundings.

It was only a short ride to Clover Cottage. Bess and Belle were outside as they drove up. They clapped their hands almost like children when they saw who were in the cars.

"Oh, you have found them!" exclaimed Belle. "Come right in. We have tea all ready, and you are not to speak one word until you are refreshed," and she grasped Nellie's hand, and gave Rose a most welcome greeting.

Andy was loath to leave the car. He wanted to start it, to stop it, and to do all sorts of things with the interesting machine. Finally, when Rose and Nellie had been refreshed, Bess and Belle provided seats for all on the broad porch, just as the detective and a strange man turned around the corner and they, too, joined the happy group.

"This is a reporter for the daily paper," said the detective. "I thought it best to have him come right down now, and get this thing all straight. It will be best to tell the story from the start, and so clear up the false impressions about the girls."

The newspaper man took out a pad of paper and a pencil in the most businesslike way, without presuming on any personal privilege, such as an introduction, or a word of acknowledgment,

for the detective's rather flattering account of the scribe's ability.

"Perhaps I had better ask you a few questions," the reporter began simply, turning to Rose. "Why did you run away from Mrs. Ramsy's house?"

"Because she was unjust to us," replied Rose. "She had never treated us decently, but when she took the very last thing we owned of our dead mother's—her wedding ring—we just took the little case it had been in, put it in a crate of berries we left under the tree for this young lady, and then—we went away."

"Where did you get that jewel case?" asked the tall detective, who seemed to be doing the most of the talking.

"We found it in Miss Schenk's scrap basket. She told us to throw out everything in the basket, and so, when we found the little leather case we decided it would be nice to keep mamma's ring in."

"And that was how you got the case!" Cora could not help exclaiming.

"Yes. Why?" asked Nellie in surprise.

"Oh, nothing. Go on," said the detective.

"Then I found the card with the address of this house," continued Rose. "We intended to come down this way to work for the summer, and

we knew that this house was vacant. That is how we came to sleep here one night."

"That's the card I picked up under the window," interrupted Andy, to whom the whole proceedings seemed as "thrilling as could be any professional theatrical performance."

"Then," Nellie helped out, "we slept one dreadful night in an old stone house. And it was haunted."

"That was the house by the spring," volunteered Jack, "where we found the hat, and other things."

"Yes," said Nellie, "we did leave some things there."

"And I found your dress away out on the road one night, very late," Bess put in, while the newspaper man smiled at the queer story with so many "personal contributions."

"Oh, yes! We were waiting for a trolley car, and we heard an automobile coming. Then I had to throw away a bundle—I didn't want to take it along with me. I thought Aunt Delia might describe our clothes."

"You got along pretty well for amateurs," remarked the detective with a laugh. "Some experts might have done worse."

"Then you came straight to Lookout Beach?" asked the reporter.

"Oh, no," answered Nellie. "We had to work our way down. First we went to work at the Wayside Inn."

"Now, I want to speak," announced Jack with a comical gesture. "I would like to know whose shadow it was I was chasing one night around the Wayside? I never had such an illusionary race before in all my life. I came near concluding that my mind was haunted."

Nellie laughed outright. "Oh, wasn't that funny!" she exclaimed. "I was trying to hide something, and you were trying to see who I was. I thought I would never get away from you, but I did fool you, after all."

"That's right," admitted Jack. "But you left me a lock of your hair."

Nellie blushed to her ear tips. Rose frowned, and shook her head to call her sister's attention to the man who was taking notes.

"Where does my story come in?" demanded Andy. "I had a part in this show."

"Oh, we are coming to you," replied the reporter. "Seems to me this will make a serial. It's a first-rate story, all right."

"Don't say anything about the graveyard," whispered Belle to Ed. "I should hate to have that to get into print."

"Oh, that's another story," replied the scribe. "We've got one end of that. The chauffeur declares he went after you, and spent all night in a cemetery—looking for the party he had left stalled there."

Jack and Ed took a hand at story telling at this juncture, and it was the orphans' turn to listen in surprise at the disclosures. Finally the boys got back to the runaways' part in the happenings.

"Then you came to Clover Cottage?" suggested Cora, smiling at the two girls.

"Yes, we came here the first night. After that we got work in the motion picture show."

"And was it your nose I almost burned off?" asked Ed. "I beg—your—pardon," and he made a courtly bow to Nellie.

"Yes. That was a great trick," said Rose. "We almost killed ourselves trying to hide that night. We managed to walk right past you, though, without your knowing us."

"And were you the 'carrier pigeon?'" asked Belle. "It was you, of course, who came up in

the automobile, played ghost, and hung the note on the lamp?"

"Oh, yes. The manager of the show wanted us to stay on, and we felt so dreadful that Nellie told him something about our trouble. Then he said he would drive us out to the cottage if we wanted to leave a message. He wrote the note for us, and Nellie crept in and hung it where she said you would be sure to see it."

"We saw it, all right," commented Jack, smiling broadly.

"And so they thought we took the old earrings," spoke up Rose indignantly.

"Well, it did look bad," said the detective, "since you had thrown the case away."

"As if we would steal!" snapped Nellie, her pretty eyes flashing.

"When we saw that story in the newspaper we had to run away again," sighed Rose. "Oh, it was dreadful!"

"But I was determined from the first that I would find you," said Jack mischievously, "and you see—I did."

"No, I did!" burst out Andy.

"Hush there, boy! Didn't I find you?" asked Jack.

"Well, we *are* found, anyhow," commented Nellie, "and I don't want to be lost again. But who got the earrings?"

"Me for the jig!" shouted Andy. "Now I come in. You see," and he straightened up, and thrust his hands in his pockets as he always did when he had anything important to divulge, "I gave the young lady the card. I gave her the tip about the cops. I piped off old lady Schenk and Ramsy, and say! You ought to see them tear around Chelton when they found everybody in the game had cleared out!"

Andy stopped to laugh. The others laughed without stopping.

"And then—golly! If me mother didn't do the old lady's wash again just because there was a strike at the patch. And—then—— She finds the sparklers tied up tight in an old rag of a handkerchief!"

"Your mother found them!" all the girls present asked in accord.

"Sure thing!" replied Andy.

"And Andy knew enough to fetch them to me," said the detective. "That is how he came to get the hundred dollars reward!"

"Hundred dollars reward!" repeated Rose and Nellie.

"Don't I look it?" demanded Andy, swinging around to show off to advantage his new clothes.

"You look a couple of hundred," replied Ed. "Say, I'd like to get one like that."

The reporter said something about not having a camera, but Andy did not hear the remark.

"And now," resumed the detective, "what are we to do with these young ladies? We have sufficient evidence to keep them away from Mrs. Ramsy. She is not a person capable of looking after children. She has all she can do to look after the mighty dollar."

"Oh, if you will only let us work," pleaded Rose. "I know a lot about housework."

"Why, we want some one right away," said Bess. "Our maid has nervous prostration from the fright that those two dreadful Squaton women gave her the day they visited our house after going to Cora's. Couldn't you let Rose and Nellie stay right here, officer? We could give them both something to do."

"They certainly can wash dishes nicely," put in Cora, smilingly.

"Why, I don't see what's the objection," said the detective. "Of course we will have to have a guardian appointed. Until then they could be placed in charge of your mother!"

Nellie opened her eyes wider than ever. Rose bit her lip to hide her confusion.

"Wouldn't that be jolly?" said Cora. "I was sure we would be able to manage it all right. Why you girls will have a good time, after all, at Lookout Beach!"

"You bet they will," declared Andy. "I'm going to stay down here for a few days, and I've got some money to spend!"

The reporter arose to go. The detective followed his example.

"We are greatly obliged," said the newspaper man. "I am sure this will make a fine story."

Down the steps of the cottage went the tall detective and the reporter.

"Don't poke fun at the poor girls," begged Cora of the newspaper man, in a whisper. "They have suffered enough."

"Indeed, and I intend to show up the woman responsible for them running away, rather than to make a spread about the poor things," the reporter assured her. "Never fear, leave it to me," and with a pleasant smile he departed.

Bess ran upstairs, where her mother was resting. So far, Mrs. Robinson had heard nothing of the ending of the quest after the runaways. Bess quickly told her the whole story, and

broached her plan of having Nellie and Rose do the housework at the cottage.

"Indeed, my dear, they shall do nothing of the sort," instantly decided Mrs. Robinson. "They shall learn some useful trade. I will see to it myself." She felt rather flattered, than otherwise, that the fate of the orphan girls rested, somewhat, with her; and she resolved to make the most of her opportunity. The housework at Clover, she said, could be done by any or all of the motor girls.

Rose and Nellie gladly acquiesced in the plan, and thus their shadows were turned to sunshine. Arrangements were made for their board at a cottage where the crippled woman and her daughter, who had been rescued from the surf, had spent a few days. The invalid, after paying a formal call on Mrs. Robinson, to thank the young people for what they had done, went back to her home.

"Well, all's well that ends the way it ought to," spoke Jack Kimball that night, as they were all gathered on the Clover porch. "But those runaways certainly gave us a chase."

"And to think how strangely it began, and how it unfolded bit by bit," remarked Cora.

"It's all to the——" began Bess.

"Bess!" exclaimed Belle, and Bess subsided,

but muttered something under her breath that made Ed and Walter laugh.

"Well, we certainly have had exciting times at Lookout Beach," spoke Ed, after a pause. "May there be more of them."

"Not quite so exciting, please," pleaded Cora. But the Motor Girls were destined to have further adventures, as will be told of in the next book of this series, to be called "The Motor Girls Through New England, Or, Held by the Gypsies." In that volume we shall learn all about a delightful tour and of a happening to Cora Kimball that was far out of the ordinary.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" suddenly exclaimed Jack, leaping to his feet, and striking an attitude.

"Forgot what?" demanded Bess.

"The dance we are going to give at our bungalow night after to-morrow. It will be great! Mrs. Robinson, will you come and bring the girls?"

"Of course," assented the twins' mother.

"Then hurrah for the first dance of the bungaloafers!" cried Ed and Walter. "Long may it last, we will live in the future, and forget all the past."

"Oh, Jack—a dance!" cried Bess. "Tell me all about it," which Jack, nothing loath, did with

much wealth of detail. And there, on the porch of Clover Cottage, while the silver moon shone over the sea, we will say good-bye, for a time, to the Motor Girls and their friends.

THE END

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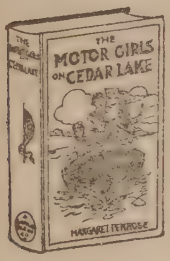

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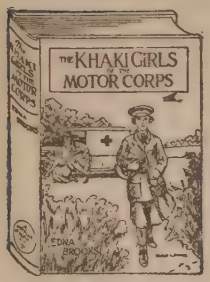

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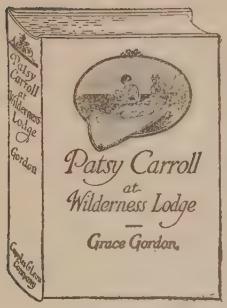

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